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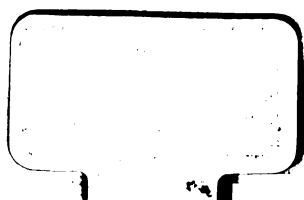
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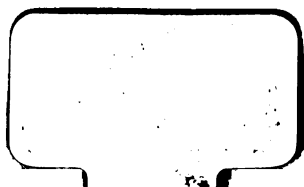


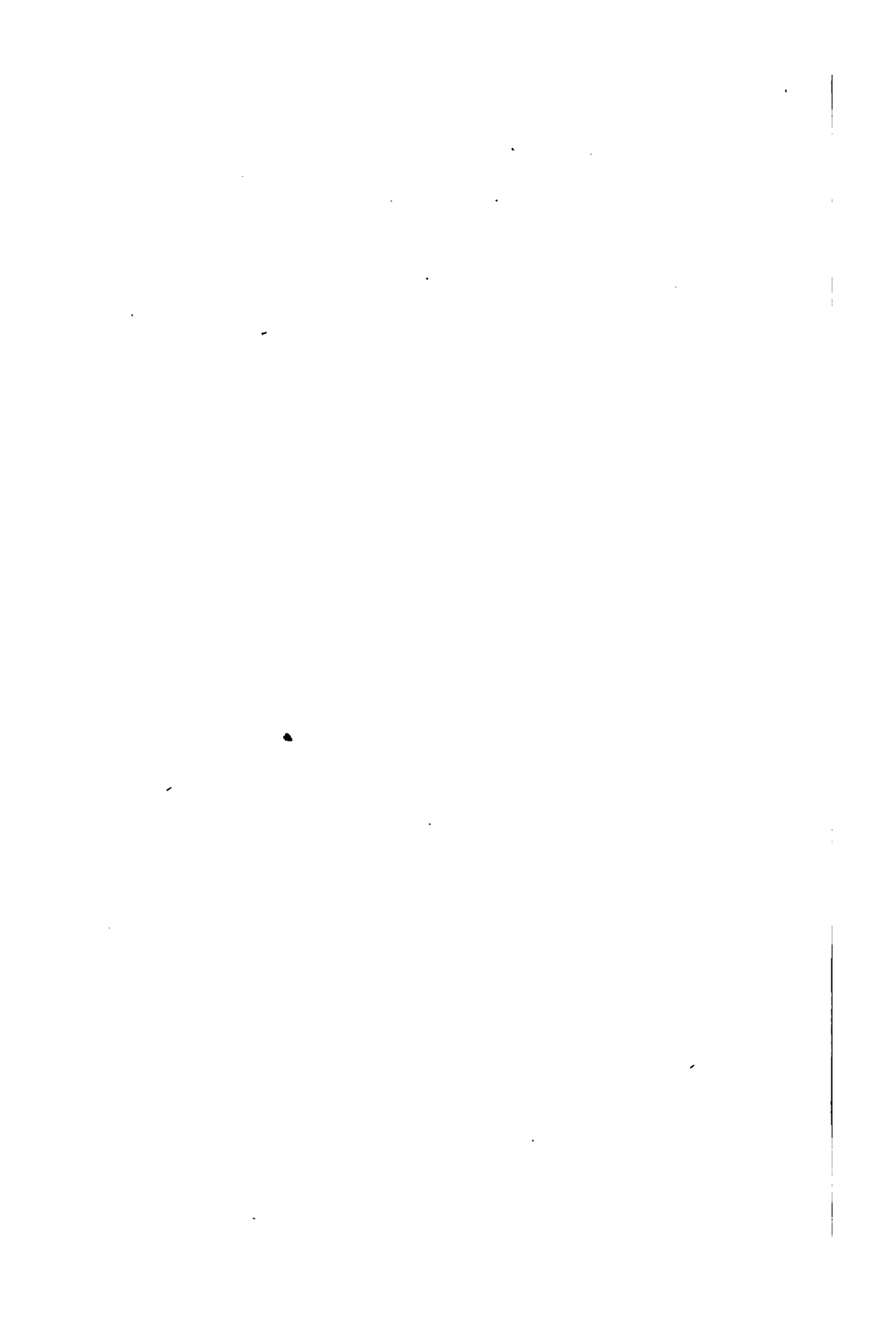
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SOCIETY'S PUPPETS. .

BY

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(MRS PENDER CUDLIP),

AUTHOR OF "BEST FOR HER," "EYRE OF BLENDON," "OUR SET,"
"COUNTY PEOPLE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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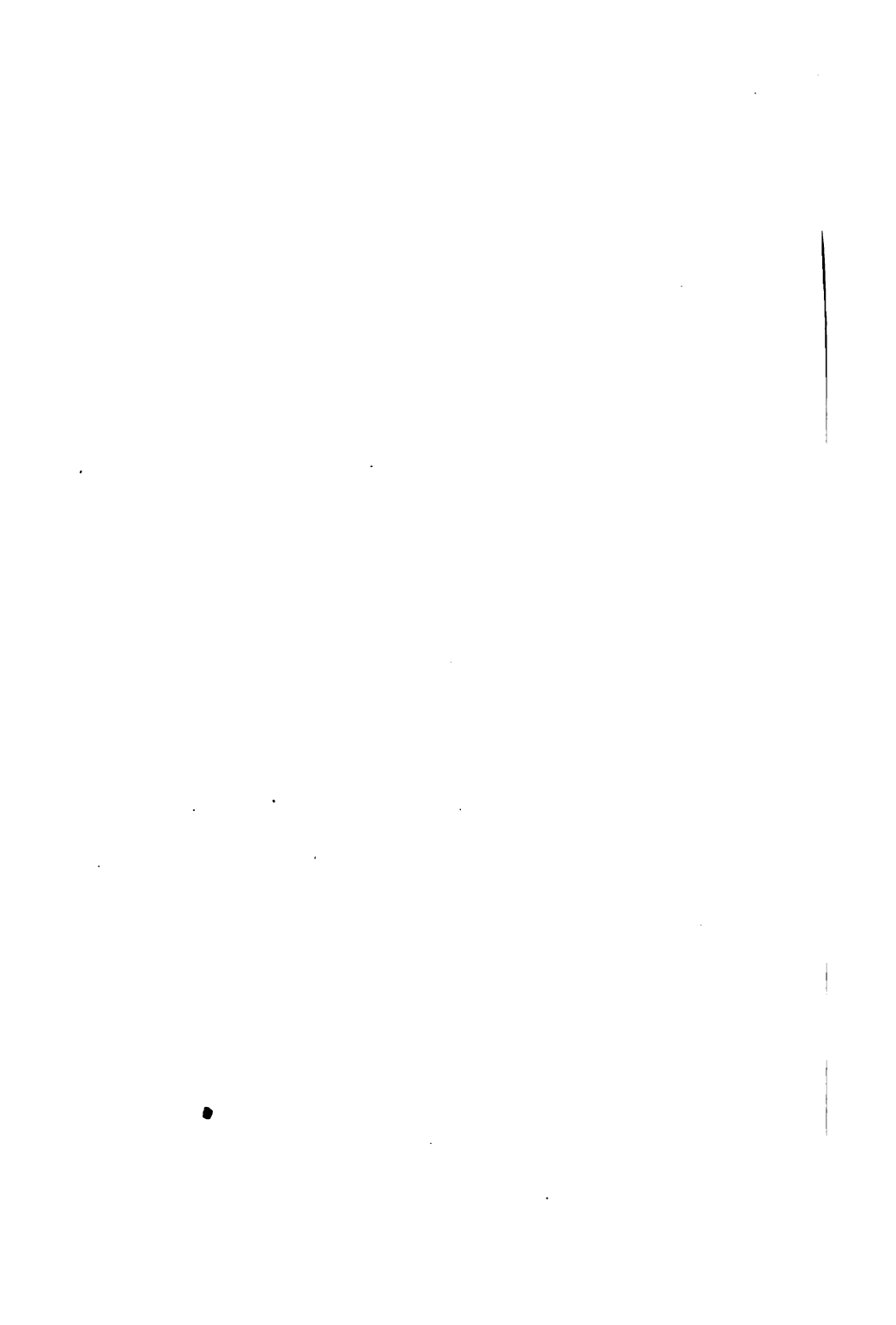
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SOCIETY'S PUPPETS.

7

THE REASON WHY.

CHAPTER V.

“NOT PRETTY,” BUT—!

FOR a full minute after Mabel utters her plea for secrecy, Edith Polling remains dumb from amazement. Then she speaks exactly what she feels, after the thorough honest fashion of the Cornish folk.

“So you two know each other already! What a shame to have taken us in!”

The girl speaks impetuously and in-

dignantly. Sweet and gentle as she is, her ideas are rather narrowly bounded, and her mind rather local on the whole. The notion that any one should have concealed anything from the Pollings of Pollington—here, on their own ground—which it concerns the Pollings of Pollington to know, is an aggravating and almost offensive one to her. Accordingly, after the masterful manner of her race, Edith—sweet and gentle as she is in her normal habit of mind—speaks.

Mabel Sutherland hears the dictatorial remark with amazed surprise. If the speech had fallen from the lips of loquacious, touchy Aunt Nellie, there would be no surprise blended with the amusement. But that Edith should forget herself, and assume an air of proprietorship over a mutual understanding which merely appears to exist between two chance acquaintances, is too funny.

"You dear little savage Arcadian," Miss Sutherland says, holding her beautifully-shaped small head well back, in a way that makes Edith feel undersized and contemptible, "'we two' know nothing whatever of one another that the whole world does not know—excepting that Mr Romilly, from the moment he came into this room, and only from that moment, has this advantage over the world—he knows where I am. Now, I don't want to have my happy solitude disturbed by cross and curious relatives, so, as *my* uncle and *his* are friends, I feebly uttered a plea for him to keep his knowledge to himself."

"Then you haven't met before?" Edith says, with a certain sense of satisfaction in the fact she is assuming, when Val has chivalrously, and perhaps rather more effusively than is his wont, given the promise that Mabel has required of him.

"No, indeed, we haven't met before,

and I shall begin to hope we may never meet again, as there is such a fuss made about it," Mabel says, blushing with annoyance, and speaking intemperately.

"Which hope I shall nip in the bud, Miss Sutherland," Mr Romilly says, with a heartlessly audacious disregard of the reproachful glances which Edith is hurling at him. "I promise you that I shall haunt your ways until I have got a pledge from you to paint me eleven (no lesser number will content me) companion pieces to the 'Swirl at Kynann.'"

"How do you know anything about that?" Mabel asks delightedly. The little painting is a pet of her own, and that it should have fallen under the appreciative gaze of this young man, whose only fault (?) consists in being the nephew of Lord Wokington, is gratifying to her.

Then he tells her about his having "accidentally strayed into a shop in Mad-

dox Street, and having had his attention arrested by her charming picture." But he does not tell her that the discovery of the whereabouts of the artist who painted that picture has been the cause of his sudden desire to establish friendly relations with the family of his friend, Godolphin Polling.

Meanwhile Edith has been vexing her sweet soul with the first harrowing suspicions that are engendered by love.

It is no use saying that she ought not to have fallen in love with this young man already. She has not "fallen in love" with him yet; but she does look upon him as her own jetsam and flotsam—a something rather precious, which she has the right to keep if she has the desire; cast at her feet by the wild waves of chance; linked to her especially by reason of his friendship for her favourite brother, Godolphin.

The drive over from Pollington has been all pure, unmixed pleasure. During it, Edith, after a brief struggle with her habitual shyness, has talked freely and openly with the stranger guest, and he has shown himself interested in hearing her descriptions of their daily life, and of their few and far-between festivities. But all this is over now! With a pang Edith sees and realises that the fair bright young artist whom she and her people have "taken up" so magnanimously, holds winning power to absorb Mr Romilly's eyes, ears, and attention.

Everything about Mabel Sutherland is pretty and attractive. Her dresses are cut in a fashion peculiar to herself, it seems, when she wears them. Yet, on any other mortal, they would look commonplace enough. Whatever she wears suits her, and adapts itself to her, and harmonises with her. Whether, as to-

day, she is dressed in a gown whose frilled skirt, gauged bodice, and puffed sleeves recall the costumes of our grandmothers, or as she will be for dinner by-and-by, in a sweeping train and cuirass body of the best modern Parisian cut, or as she will be, perhaps to-morrow, in a manly-looking Newmarket, it is all the same. Whatever she wears becomes her best! Edith acknowledges this feeling with a sigh, and nobody tries to extinguish her unworthy feeling of jealousy at such being the case.

What a dream of delight, what a revelation of the possibilities of great happiness, this drive back is to Val Romilly. As he sits on the back seat of the pony-trap he commands a good view of Miss Sutherland's figure and profile, and the view appears to his already enamoured eye as perfect as any he has ever seen.

Affection for his uncle has never been

a strong point in Val's character, but he positively loathes the thought of him, remembering that the Earl has coveted and tried to win this beautiful young girl.

"It would have been Beauty and the Beast with a vengeance," he says suddenly, aloud, after having pondered on the obnoxious subject for some moments in silence; and Mabel glances round at him swiftly, and he reads in her heightened colour that she is conscious of his meaning.

"What would have been Beauty and the Beast?" Edith asks, in a perplexed way, turning her head round also to look at him. "I think your night journey has tired you very much more than you like to admit, Mr Romilly, and that you are talking now in your sleep."

"Perhaps I am; the fact is, I've been suffering from a fearful nightmare.

I thought an ogre wanted to marry a Fairy Queen, Queen Mab herself," he says gravely.

"What do you mean?" Edith interrogates a little sharply. It seems to her that there is a private understanding between these two people who are professedly strangers to one another, and the suspicion that she is being kept in the dark by them acidulates her manner slightly.

"Do you mean that you really have had a nightmare, or are you just making it up because we told you Shelley had called his mare 'Queen Mab,' after Miss Sutherland? I don't like being puzzled and laughed at."

"And I don't like the pet name that was given me by my dear aunt used familiarly by every one," Mabel says haughtily; and Mr Romilly looks rebuked and uncomfortable, a little to Edith's secret satisfaction.

Presently the little cloud blows over, and Mabel and Mr Romilly fall to chatting about the "home bits" and the "distances," and the colour that is in the atmosphere in this blue, unclouded weather. And here is another point of interest between this pair, who are already interested in one another: Val is fond of painting too, and can talk sensibly, and rapturously, and poetically about it to this girl who loves it with her whole heart.

"Oh! that I could paint or sketch *ever* so little," Edith thinks repiningly. It is hard that her own brother's dear friend should have closer sympathies with Mabel than with her (Edith). It is hard that when she has pictured such a splendid future for Mabel as to be Godolphin's wife—the Mistress of Pollington, that Godolphin's friend should come and upset the arrangement.

The girl who has given up the reins of her heart all too quickly for prudence, looks forward now rather dismally to the days that are coming. Shelley and Flora Field, the acknowledged lovers, will probably be all in all to one another, and will need none of her company; and Mr Romilly and Mabel will be always out sketching. Of course they will pair off naturally, and leave her to her own devices.

“And why should they not?” she asks herself, striving to combat her own discontent. Has she not asked Mabel Sutherland to stay at Pollington in order that Mr Romilly’s sojourn among them may be made as pleasant as possible? What other than this inevitable end could she in reason have contemplated when she brought such a pair of attractive young people together? Only she did not contemplate it, to tell the truth, and it has developed so very quickly.

They are back at Pollington in time for a stroll about the grounds before the dressing-bell rings, and the three are standing on the broad terrace in front of the house, sniffing in ozone preparatory to exploring some of the ferny depths, when Aunt Nellie comes bustling out to them.

"So glad to see you, Miss Sutherland, though I'm worried out of my wits almost. Such news, Edith, my dear, since you went away! Shelley has had a telegram from Miss Field, telling him that, for the sake of having company as far as Truro, she's coming three days earlier than she intended, and will be here to-night. So very upsetting!" the good lady concludes, looking blandly round for sympathy.

"I don't see why you should upset yourself, Aunt Nellie. I'm glad she is coming to-night, I'm anxious to see her," Edith says, making a step in the direction of the woods as she speaks.

"Yes, dear, that's quite natural and nice of you," the elder lady says eagerly; "only do come in now—I'm sure Miss Sutherland will excuse you—and give the little finishing touches to her room, that servants never think of doing; a few flowers nicely arranged, and so forth, you know."

Edith hesitates, and looks disappointed. It is not entering into her head to decline to do her aunt's bidding, but she is not preparing to do it with cheerful alacrity.

Something of this, and perhaps something of the reason why of it, flashes into Mabel's mind, and without delay she comes to the rescue.

"Let me come and arrange some flowers in Miss Field's room, Miss Polling. Edith has just promised to show Mr Romilly a peculiarly fine hart's-tongue. Let me come with you," Mabel says, with fine magnanimity, which pierces Edith's soul with vain remorse for having the minute be-

fore been wishing to be rid of such a generous rival.

“Well,” Aunt Nellie says, with her best judicial air on, “you’d do them very prettily, I’m sure of that, my dear—such taste you have, quite perfect; but I’m rather fidgety about the flowers that are put in a bedroom. Some that are sweet and healthy by day, are quite noxious at night. Edith knows the kind that are always used for bedroom decoration at Pollington, and so she had better come in, and you can show the hart’s-tongue fern to Mr Romilly.”

“No, no, no! I don’t know the local habitation of this special fern, and I can’t go wrong if I put roses, and roses only, in the room,” Mabel says, dancing away to the house without giving one sympathetic look at Val, who reluctantly walks away towards the wood with his young hostess.

There is the fascination of pain about

Mabel Sutherland's name to Edith by this time, so she mentions it as soon as may be.

"Isn't Miss Sutherland pretty, Mr Romilly? Did you ever see any one so pretty as she is?"

"I never saw any one quite so charming," he says fervently.

"And to be charming in *her* way is more than beauty, and she has beauty too."

"Yes, she has beauty too. This fern is a long way off," he says absently.

"It's not far now; but—would you rather go back to—to the house?" she asks, gulping down her vexation at his indifference gallantly.

"Well, shall we go back and help Miss Sutherland with her floral decorations now, and look for the fern another day?"

"As you like," the girl says, wheeling round sharply, and marching off towards the house at a good pace; "only we shouldn't have had to 'look' for the

fern ; I knew where it was, and we were close to it."

"Then we shouldn't have had the excitement of a search even," he replies gaily, being utterly unconscious both of her chagrin and the cause of it.

For some reason or other, Mabel keeps aloof from Mr Romilly for the remainder of this evening. It is in vain that he gets near her now and again, and broaches the suggestive and congenial subject of painting to her. She will not respond. She has got hold of Anthony Trollope's latest novel, and "Not all the king's horses, nor all the king's men, can make me put it down to-night," she tells him.

"A more interesting piece of romance will be enacted presently, when the bride-elect of the son of the house arrives," he tells her ; "be content with a study from life to-night. Come out in the moonlight and witness the arrival and reception."

"No, I should feel an intruder; let the family have their innings, and let us be content to make Miss Field's acquaintance later on."

"I like to be associated with you even in a game of patience," he laughs. And then, in spite of that absorbed interest which she will go on portraying in Anthony Trollope's novel, he tells her some of the things he has thought about her, when she was to him but a name.

"You were a mixture of saint and goddess to me, and when I heard you were to be my aunt, I nearly had a fit."

"But you never could have heard that I was to be your aunt, and if you heard it, knowing your uncle, you couldn't have believed it."

"You see I know your uncle too—by report; and he was in favour of your being a Countess."

"We won't talk about our uncles," Mabel

laughs. "What an old horror yours is, to be sure; do you know I can't fancy you to be his nephew."

Anthony Trollope is evidently losing his sway about this juncture; but she makes a gallant attempt to devote herself to him for a few minutes after saying this, and Val sits watching her closely.

At last they hear wheels, and she flings the book aside, and jumps up quite flushed and excited.

"Hark! that's the carriage with Miss Field. How she must be wondering what they are all like, coming here a stranger to them all, knowing that she may be the mistress by-and-by. It's an interesting experience, a trying ordeal for a young girl. Let us go out and see how she passes through it."

"We will," Val says, delighted by the way in which she is unconsciously claiming him as her comrade; and so it is on

this handsome pair that Flora Field's eyes rest as the carriage draws up, and they stand there framed in the doorway.

"What a beauty! I'm glad she's only your sister, Shelley," Flora cries aloud, and her gaze is riveted on Mabel's face as she speaks. "I should be awfully jealous of any one else being so good-looking. I'm glad she's your sister."

"That's not Edith—it's Miss Sutherland," Shelley whispers, and Flora Field utters a sharp exclamation of annoyance.

"And the man?—the man?" she whispers eagerly, "is he—"

"That splendid fellow Romilly, Dolph's friend. Aren't they a fine pair?"

Flora does not vouchsafe any answer to this remark, but descends from the carriage with a collected expression of fixed resolve on her face which betokens something; and this fixed resolve is, to intervene between this "fine pair" in some way or

other. She has not decided how, just yet.

Mabel, meanwhile, with the eye of an artist, is scanning closely the form and features of the new guest, who is submitting rather than responding to the family's greetings and congratulations.

"Not pretty," Mr Romilly whispers in her ear, as they wait a little in the background to be introduced to the heroine of the hour. "Not pretty; too dark and determined looking."

Mabel makes no reply. She recognises something more potent and seductive than mere beauty in Flora Field already.

Not pretty! So many another man has said of Flora at first sight, and has realised afterwards, to his torment, that the undefinable "something," which Mabel has recognised, lives in his memory, to the extinction of any other woman's claims upon it.

This first night is not a fitting or fair occasion on which to attempt to depict her, for she has been travelling for many weary hours, and she is nerve-tired, and indisposed to exert herself. Accordingly, she chooses the dimmest corner of the room, where she lies back in a fat and capacious chair, and allows herself to be assiduously attended by her lawful lover. Her supper is brought to her here by Shelley, who offers his shoulder as a convenient rest for her plate while she languidly and daintily eats her cold chicken and sips champagne.

“The family” flutter about her, anticipating her slightest wants and wishes with praiseworthy devotion, and she accepts all their attentions with a quiet reserve that rather disappoints the warm-hearted sister and aunt of the man she is going to marry. But old Mr Polling approves of her highly, tells himself that she “is a steady, undemonstrative girl, with no humbug about

her," and inwardly commends his son's choice highly.

As for Mabel Sutherland and Mr Romilly, they do not appear to exist for her, so utterly does she ignore them. But for all this external indifference, they do not utter a word to, or give a glance one at the other, that she does not hear and see.





CHAPTER VI.

“LOVE’S A TYRANT AND A SLAVE.”

FOUR or five days have passed since Flora’s arrival, and that young lady has given all of them but Mabel conclusive reasons for altering their first hastily-formed opinion of her.

To Edith and her aunt the girl is no longer politely reserved. She responds with demonstrative warmth to what in her heart she calls “the ridiculous fuss they make about her.” To old Mr Polling she makes such a display of flattering coquettish arts and graces, that the worthy man feels almost timid, and fancies that his son may fear a

rival in him. To Val Romilly she has talked and sang, and at Val Romilly she has looked while talking and singing in a way that has made him marvel at the idiotic blindness which made him declare, when she first flashed upon him, that she was "not pretty." Only to Mabel does she appear to be exactly the same—namely, a flirt of the first water, with a fiendish love of conquest for conquest's sake.

To Shelley she still shines the guiding-star of his existence.

The five young people, together with an incidental man who has no part in this history, have been playing lawn tennis vigorously all the afternoon, and Flora has proved herself a better player than all of them—excepting Mabel. To be beaten in anything by the girl whose superior beauty she cannot help admitting, is gall and wormwood to Miss Field, and as she dresses for dinner she casts about for a means of out-

shining her rival—here, to-night, before them all.

It is bitterness to her to be shone down in any way by any one. But never before has she experienced such bitterness as this. For though she means to keep the letter of her promise to Shelley, she has marked Val Romilly for her own, and the beautiful young artist is a stumbling-block to the accomplishment of her desires.

Weakly, in a moment of vain-glorious satisfaction with, and belief in, her own artistic powers, she proposed “a morning sketching out on the cliffs” yesterday morning, meaning to show Val that, amateur as she is, she can compete with a professional. But her sketch, though clever, was crude, her colouring was wrong, and, with the usual amateur hardihood, she strove to represent something so vast on her little block, that the effort was a mere blundering caricature. Whereas Mabel’s sketch of a

few waves, with two sea - gulls gliding through the air close to them, had life, and knowledge, and truth in it ; and Val Romilly had worshipped the brilliant, beautiful art displayed, till he seemed to be worshipping the woman who displayed it.

“ But to-night I will sing,” Flora says to herself, as she fastens a yellow rose at her throat ; “ they none of them but Shelley know that I can sing, and he doesn't know *how* I can yet.”

She takes a parting glance at herself in the glass as she thinks thus, and goes down to dinner well satisfied.

This is what the glass has reflected,—

A perfectly proportioned form of middle height, clothed in a fashionably made dress of old gold broché silk. A tiny head covered with short dark silky hair. A perfectly oval face lighted up by a pair of magnificent dark eyes, whose brightness is tempered by long black curling lashes. A

low wide brow, a well-defined aquiline nose, and a firmly-cut mouth, full of small white regular teeth. It is the decided lines, and strong expression of these two features, which cause most men to declare, at first sight, that Flora Field is "not pretty."

Her voice is as clear as a bell, her gestures and manners frank, free, and unrestrained as a child's. To-night, though Shelley's blood boils at the sight, and Mabel's heart sinks low, there is not a shadow of impropriety, not a touch of aught but childish trustfulness, in the way in which Flora clasps her two hands round Mr Romilly's arm, and entreats him to "sing for her! She has not heard a note of music since she came to Pollington, and the want of it makes such a blank in her life; she loves it so."

There is not a touch of aught save childish trustfulness and thoughtlessness in the action, yet the red flag flies on

Val's face in a moment, and his whole frame thrills to that light touch upon his arm.

"By the way, Flo, *you* sing. I'd forgotten that," Shelley says, hastily rising up and going to the piano, and Flora resolves to punish him a little for this avowed forgetfulness.

"I have set my heart on hearing Mr Romilly sing first; I may not have the courage to sing after him, but I certainly *won't* do it before."

"Oh, my dear! I'm sure you will if Shelley asks you," Aunt Nellie interposes, with the well-intentioned desire of making things pleasant, in return for which interposition she receives a scowl from Shelley, who feels quite competent to manage his lady-love without aid.

"Come," Flora says, coaxingly, to Val, and again she puts her hand on the young man's arm. "I know you sing; I heard

you in your room when I was sitting under your window this afternoon ; you have the voice I love best—a baritone. I can never resist a baritone ; if Santley sang that song you were singing to-day at a concert, I believe I should be impelled to leap on to the platform, and rush into his arms.”

“What a goose he would think you,” Shelley says savagely ; but Romilly rises, gives a deprecating glance at Mabel, who has grown very white, and says,—

“Tell me what it shall be, Miss Field ?”

“Why, the same song you were singing to-day, and I’ll accompany you,” she replies, but Val keeps his head sufficiently to reject her offer, and declare in favour of accompanying himself.

The song he sings is spirited and fine ; gallant words are wedded to a gallant air ; but Shelley Polling writhes as he listens to some of the former, and Mabel Sutherland is filled with vain remorse for having

let the man who is singing them win her heart and hold her hand.

For they are sung under the direct inspiration of Flora Field :—

“ You may teach the eagle to stoop to your wrist,
Or you may inveigle the phoenix of the East ;
The lioness you may tame her to give up her prey,
But you'll never stop a lover ; *he* will find out
the way.”

Val Romilly sings the whole of the passionate chivalrous song from beginning to end, and throws a world of force and feeling into the refrain, “ Love will find out the way ; ” and Flora stands at the end of the piano looking at him — kindling to the strain—the whole time.

When he leaves, she utters no words of thanks, leaving the others to be profuse in their words of praise and acknowledgment. She merely turns away with a sigh !

“ What a voice and what a style, my

dear Mr Romilly," good Aunt Nellie says effusively ; " quite as good as any of the great Italian opera singers, I'm sure ; and that we, through being ignorant of your gift, should have been deprived of this great pleasure all along ! I'm sure we ought to be very much obliged to Flora for having found you out ; such a beautiful song, too, ' Love will find out the way.' So he will, to be sure, and quite right too," and the excellent lady laughs heartily.

" Are you not going to say a word to me to-night ? " Val says, in a low tone, to Miss Sutherland, taking a seat by her side.

Edith has surrendered him entirely on her own account in all sweetness, but to-night she begins to feel that Mabel's sovereignty over him is endangered.

" What can I say that you will care to hear to-night ? " Mabel answers.

" Queen Mab, it is not like you to be cross and capricious," and his hand touches

hers as it lies upon the sofa, in the kindly low light. "Won't you say you liked the song, even if you did not think it was sung well?"

"You didn't sing it for me to like," she says, betraying her jealousy unconsciously; and her fair beauty and delicate high-bred grace sways him away from all thoughts of the dark, cruel young syren opposite—for a time.

"Mabel," he whispers, in desperate, tender earnest, "the words *ought* to have had their fullest meaning to you! Whom did I come into Cornwall to seek? You know well! Love led me a long dance."

"In search of an ideal," she says coldly, "you came down here, and have found the reality."

"In you," he says recklessly, for even as he speaks he feels his brow is glowing under the burning glance which Flora Field is bending on him.

Poor Queen Mab cannot check a sigh that is almost a sob. She has come to regard this man by her side very tenderly—*too* tenderly, she fears. And he, though he has not openly avowed affection for her, has shown it in a hundred ways. How her pride revolts now at the recollection of the way in which she has let him take her hand and retain it! How she dreads that he may hear the beating of her heart, now that he is bending down so near to her! What rapture is mixed with her remorse for having suffered her heart to go out! What anguish mingles with the rapture, as she thinks that he may be won away from her by Flora's fatal charm!

Meanwhile, Flora, savage at seeing Mabel regaining a temporary ascendancy over the man she (Flora) is determined to subjugate, is yielding with sweet and gradual grace to the repeated request of her lover and

his adoring relatives that she will sing to them.

"Yes, I'll sing, but you must select the song from that heap of mine on the piano," she says, ringing out her words with a clear cadence that nearly makes Val jump. She is in truth speaking to him, though she is looking at her own loyal, stalwart lover, Shelley, and Val Romilly knows it.

So even while Mabel Sutherland is sitting quivering to his lightest touch by his side, Flora's words reach him, ring through his ears into his soul, and sway him to her again in spite of himself.

He rises from his seat by Mabel's side, dropping the hand he has just ventured to take, in careless haste, crosses the room, and begins turning over the pile of music on the piano.

"May I choose your song, Miss Field?"

"No," she says, coming to him swiftly,

and speaking with a sharp emphasis that is meant to remind him that she is an engaged girl, and that her lover is present. Then, having said this for the satisfaction of the company, she adds, in a breathless whisper, standing close beside him, "But I will choose a song to sing to you! do you hear me?"

"Ay, and understand you," he mutters in return, and Flora turns her piles of songs over hastily, selects one, and then pours forth in a volume of melody those time-honoured, well-worn words,—

"Why weep ye by the tide, ladye, why weep ye by
the tide?
I'll wed ye to my youngest son, and ye shall be
his bride,
And ye shall be his bride, ladye, sae comely to
be seen,
But aye she loot the tears doon fa' for Jock o'
Hazeldean."

No one hearing the way in which the

girl renders these words can doubt for a moment that she is with dramatic instincts casting herself and others for the characters of the song. Her voice is a glorious one, and it has been well trained. She makes her points with deadly effect, and Val Romilly almost feels as if she was "o'er the border and awa'" with him, as she brings her strain to a triumphant finish. But he cannot speak conventional words of thanks and flattery—nor, it seems, can Shelley, who is looking at her from a distance. Nor can old Mr Polling, who is much on the alert to-night—partly because he finds that he is being neglected, and partly because he fancies his son may be.

"I don't like that song, Flora," he calls out raspingly. "I've always thought the girl who went off after being properly engaged and kindly received by the young man's father was an ungrateful young jade ;

and as for Jock o' Hazeldean, who came in and took her away in that villainous manner, he is a ruffianly robber in my opinion, nothing better."

The old gentleman works himself into a fume as he speaks, and Flora turns her head very slightly, with irritating calmness, as she answers him,—

"I'm sorry you don't like my pet song, Mr Polling, for I sing it better than anything else. I've found *that* out to-night; and as for Jock being a 'ruffianly robber,' I can only say *I'd* be 'o'er the border and awa'' with such another if I could find him, and he would ask me."

She flings out her words as if they were a challenge, and there is silence in the room for a few oppressive moments. Then Val Romilly makes an effort to lift the clouds by saying,—

"Shelley, you sing, I know. Dolph has often told me so. As melody and

harmony is the order of the night, won't you give us something?"

"Nothing 'namby-pamby' please, Shelley," his betrothed cries out, and, thus counselled, Shelley carols forth,—

"Shall I like a hermit dwell,
On a rock or in a cell,
Calling home the smallest part
That is missing of my heart,
To bestow it where I may
Meet a rival every day?
If she undervalue me,
What care I how fair she be!"

There is a perfect hush in the room while he sings through the good song gallantly, but when he comes to the last verse,—

"But if she by change hath got
To her heart a *second lot*,
Then if others share with me,
Farewell to her, whoe'er she be!"

Flora is visibly moved, though by what emotion it is not easy to tell.

"I like those old songs," Aunt Nellie says; "but, my dear boy, you needn't have looked as if you were acting the meaning of it. I like things to be sung nicely and quietly; that's when *I* think one can always tell the difference between opera and concert people, and gentlemen and ladies; but you raved out the words as if you wanted us to hear them quite as clearly as the tune."

"Oh! I like to hear the words, even if they're misunderstood by an amateur," Flora says gaily, coming up as blythely and valiantly as if she did not know that her lover is within a hair's-breadth of breaking off his engagement for life with her.

"I don't think I 'misunderstood' the words," Shelley growls. "*I meant* them;" and the aggrieved young man hums over two or three bars again.

"If she undervalue me,
Farewell to her, whoe'er she be!"

"There's something plucky about the spirit of those words," Flora muses. "I like the idea of a man putting it to the touch, and doing and daring all, directly he doubts a girl. I *like* the type of man who says, 'But if thou use me as a blind, I'll never love thee more.'"

"Do you, Flora?" Shelley whispers; "if you do, darling, like me a little to the last, for I say it to you now."

But all the answer Flora deigns to give to this address is to gaze with a look of amazed wonder at her *fiancé*, and to say to Val Romilly,—

"Mr Romilly, I'm so tired of ferocious strains, *please* let me go to rest with the sound of something gentle and soothing in my ears. Miss Sutherland, will you let Mr Romilly sing for me once more?"

"Mr Romilly may do what he pleases for you as far as I am concerned," Mabel replies, in those level tones which are

meant to portray indifference, and which do so surely portray wounded pride and feeling; and in a fit of resentment against both the girls for—he hardly knows what—he sings, in throbbing, imploring tones,—

“Come! for my arms are empty;
Come! for my heart is lone;
Come! for I love thee dearly;
Come! I am all thine alone.”

It is a heart-stirring and subduing song, and it is well sung. But somehow or other it strikes discordantly on the ears and feelings of all in the room, save Flora.

She revels in it and triumphs. He is “all her own,” confessedly so, for his eyes have spoken eloquently. All her own! Her own prize! The victim of her brilliant shots. Won from Mabel Sutherland, the beauty! All her own! And now what shall she do with him? Because “there’s Shelley to be considered; I don’t

mean to give Shelley up, unless he's ever so much better worth marrying than Shelley," she tells herself, as she discreetly wishes them all "good-night" at this juncture, and retires to rest.

But an hour after this, when the rest of the household has in good earnest retired to bed, Flora comes forth from her room full-dressed, and rather fresher than when she entered it, and she makes her way noiselessly to the library, where Val Romilly sits smoking a cigar.

She enters the room with a good deal of the exquisitely unconscious grace which is a speciality of Patti's in *La Somnambula*, softly singing the refrain of the last song he has sung for her, "Come, I am all thine own;" and as she pretends to perceive his presence with surprise, and a look of pleased but passionate alarm spreads over her face, Val Romilly realises that he is face to face with his fate!

“By Jove! The situation is sensational, not to say ticklish!” he says to himself anything but reassuringly.

The “situation” is even more fraught with danger than he imagines, for even now Edith is creeping into Mabel’s room, whispering,—

“Oh! Mabel dear, isn’t it *awful*! I’m breaking my heart for Shelley, and who will tell him? I believe that Flora (wicked wretch) and Mr Romilly are running away together.”

“Let them run,” Mabel says composedly; but her face is muffled in the sheet.

“Oh! Mab, Mab, don’t say such things,” Edith cries, in friendly wrath; “they’re down in the library now.”

“Then they’re not running away!”

“And if Aunt Nellie hears them, or the servants, Flora’s character will be *gone*, and she’s to be Shelley’s wife.”

“ Her character sha’n’t go,” Mabel says, springing up, and beginning to dress hastily. “ I’ll take care of that, and you’ll help me, for she *may be* Val Romilly’s wife by-and-by.”





CHAPTER VII.

A WARM CORNER.

MASTERING her emotions, subduing all expression of her natural jealous wrath by a supreme effort, Mabel Sutherland hastens down to the rescue of her unscrupulous rival's reputation. If a whisper of this indiscretion of Flora's get bruited abroad by any of those domestic detectives, who are always ready to put the worst construction upon appearances, Mabel resolves that she herself and Edith shall be witnesses in her defence. Witnesses against the force of their innermost convictions, perhaps, but still

harbours of refuge and towers of strength to the unworthy Flora.

As they approach the library, Mabel pauses with a blush burning on her face that makes it smart, and says to Edith,—

“I have thought of a plea for disturbing them; let us take it for granted that they are playing billiards in order that she may get ahead of us in her practice.”

Edith nods assentingly. Her face is white with dread of what may happen if Shelley hears of this, and her whole frame is trembling with the doubt of whether she had not better tell Shelley the truth, break off the marriage, and let the erring Flora go her own way.

But then,—the fearful scandal there would be in the neighbourhood. Besides, Mabel has ruled it otherwise, and—Edith bends to Mabel's rule.

“Oh, you mean creatures,” Mabel cries aloud, beginning to shake the handle of

the door; "so you've come back to have a quiet practice, have you?" Then she slowly opens the door and enters with Edith, and, behold! Flora, with quick adaptability, and with the instinct of self-preservation strong upon her, has taken the hint, and is standing in unembarrassed ease at the billiard-table with a cue in her hand.

But Val Romilly does not attempt to feign to be engaged in the game.

He is still smoking, lying back in his chair, looking and feeling very glum and much perplexed. But he recognises Mabel's motive in thus doing violence to her own pride and feelings, in seeking to save Flora from the consequences of her own audacious recklessness, and does not love Mabel the less for it.

"Let us have a proper game, now, Miss Field," Mabel goes on. "Edith and I against Mr Romilly and you?"

"Yes; if you like," Flora says, biting her lip with vexation. She knows by this time that Mabel Sutherland has not followed her in enmity; but, all the same, Miss Field finds it impossible to pardon the interruption. It is Flora's fixed belief that if it had not occurred Val Romilly would have uttered some irrevocable words in a few minutes, for he had been confused and flattered by her having come back "to seek him," as she had half confessed to having done. But now! her dream of being a countess, and of being the wife of a man to whom she has taken a violent "fancy" (it is nothing more), has been rudely dispelled, and she will not only have to fall back upon Shelley, but will owe the being able to do so to the quick wit of Mabel Sutherland, her disliked rival.

"I'm so nervous," Edith says blunderingly, forgetting that she is supposed

to be unsuspicious and unconscious; "don't let us play to-night, Queen Mab. If papa hears us he will be angry, and if Shelley hears us it will be awful."

"I'll brave your father's and brother's wrath, and bear the brunt of all the blame of this midnight meeting," Mabel says buoyantly, and Val Romilly flings away the end of his cigar and comes to her side.

"I'm on your side, against Miss Polling and Miss Field?" he says imploringly, and as Mabel gladly assents, Flora flings her cue away to the other side of the room, where it descends with a sharp rattle that makes Edith jump.

"If Aunt Nellie hears that she'll ring the alarm-bell," she cries piteously. "Oh, Flora, *how can you be so rash?*"

"Fifty alarm-bells may ring now, for all I care," Flora says tempestuously. "I'm going; Miss Sutherland and Mr

Romilly may play their game out without any interruption from me."

Even as she speaks the alarm-bell peals forth sonorously, and presently an excited group, consisting of Mr Polling, Shelley, Aunt Nellie, and the servants, appear more or less in *deshabille*, among the properly attired delinquents in the drawing-room.

There is much flurry and confusion, but at last (Mabel is the spokeswoman) it is made clear to them that the whole thing is a joke. A bit of girlish fun and emulation between Flora and Miss Sutherland anent billiards. With this explanation they all appear to be content, but Val Romilly fancies that Shelley Polling looks at him rather strangely, and does not seem so well satisfied with the elucidation of the mystery as the others are.

Presently it is proved that the alarm-bell has done its work, for at least fifty stalwart fishermen from the adjacent village

come clamouring at the doors to know what they can do to serve the family. These have to be beered and fee'd, and informed as to the origin of the alarm. Consequently, many strange versions of the story are afloat on the social sea in this part of Cornwall in the course of the next few days, and the current local opinion concerning Miss Field and Miss Sutherland is that "they are a pair of skeery ones."

When Flora goes back to her room, and all the excitement is over, a burst of passionate tears relieves the strain she has put upon herself during the last few hours. When she grows calmer, she says to herself bitterly,—

"A few minutes more alone with him would have settled it; when a man tells a girl 'that she maddens him,' it's her own fault if something sufficiently definite for her to take hold of doesn't follow;

and to-morrow all the world should have known that I was engaged to the Earl of Wokington. He would never have suspected that I had heard of his uncle's death before he got the news himself; and I should have had such a triumph over that conceited Queen Mab as woman never won before, for she adores him, the goose!"

Miss Flora Field, it will be seen by this time, is a young lady of much resource and prompt action. The fact of being located for an indefinite period in the same county with the handsome nephew and heir-presumptive of an earl is one that has roused her always active energies to the utmost. She is, in spite of her faults of vanity and selfishness, one of those girls who have a number of devoted female adherents, and on these she relies for an early supply of all sorts of information about any one in whom she may chance to be interested. From one

of these indefatigable allies she has learnt, by telegram to-day, that "The Earl of Wokington died suddenly last night. Supposed apoplexy. Val is now the Earl. Look out!"

The arrival of this telegram had caused quite a little commotion at Pollington. It had been handed to her at lunch, and she had digested its contents, with the eyes of the whole party fixed upon her, with an unruffled mien. Then she had pocketed it, saying,—

"Tiresome things dressmakers are; my cream-coloured silk won't be down till next week."

And after this she had played lawn tennis all the afternoon, and interchanged songs with a meaning all the evening with Val Romilly.

To have been baffled in her final *coup* by Mabel Sutherland's inopportune appearance is too much.

“Never mind,” she says to herself just before going to sleep; “if I get him one hour alone before he hears the news, I’ll be Lady Wokington. He’ll think I’m ready to run risks and make sacrifices for him, and that will touch him. Afterwards—when he knows better—I should stand no chance; but oh, *if* I get him alone in the morning!”

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It is the morning after the alarm-bell has been sounded at Pollington; the sumptuous, substantial, well-ordered breakfast is over, and the several members of the party are dispersing in pursuit of their respective employments. Shelley is going to ride round the farm, and he asks Flora to go with him; but Flora, with many expressions of regret,—expressions which flow with such a wonderful air of veracity from her lips, that a man must scorn himself as a suspicious-minded hound who does not

believe them all,—declines on the score of having “letters to write;” the fact being that she does not feel inclined to come to any explanation with Shelley about last night’s billiard playing until she has had one with Val Romilly.

The girl is looking wonderfully well this morning. Her short, broad-striped, blue-and-white skirt and skin-fitting jersey body are in harmony with her piquant and picturesque style. Excitement has brought a brilliant light to her eyes, and a beautiful bloom to her cheeks. Altogether, she may safely be marked “dangerous.”

She loiters about from room to room for a time, keeping a sharp look on the entrance-door the while; and presently she has the satisfaction of seeing Mabel go upstairs for her sketching materials, and Val Romilly saunter out towards a side garden, where Flora knows there is an encouraging seat imbedded in a high closely-clipped

yew hedge, and shaded by the drooping branches of a magnificent copper-beech.

"There I shall surely find him," she says to herself, for she remembers having heard Mabel say that she was going to make a sketch of the bay from this point ; "he'll go there and lie in wait for a quiet hour's flirtation with Miss Sutherland ! He shall have one that shall end in serious earnest with me instead ; my will is my will ! and it is my will to be the Countess of Wokington."

Val, sitting at ease in the sweetly-shaded warm corner under the copper-beech tree, lazily watching the white sea-gulls as they swoop and swerve over the waves that come rolling up on the beach just beneath him, hears light footsteps presently, and feels the blood flow more swiftly through his veins. "It is Mabel ; dear, beautiful, bonnie Queen Mab," he tells himself ; and he wonders how she will look at him after

last night's adventure, and if she will hold him as guiltless as he really is in the matter.

"She has run away from a coronet and a fortune because she won't perjure herself and promise to love and honour a man she loathes and hates. I wonder whether she'll risk poverty and dulness for one she loves ; for she *does* love me, I feel sure of that."

Even as this thought flashes through his mind with lightning rapidity, the light feet to which he is listening bear their owner to his side, and to his disappointment and dismay it is Flora, and not Queen Mab.

"I thought you had letters to write?" he says bluntly, as she seats herself by him.

"So I have ; but I'm not going to write them this morning."

"You told Shelley you were."

"And I intended to, then ; but my mood has changed. I thought it would be

pleasanter to come out here and think, and now it's pleasanter still, for instead of thinking, I have you to talk to."

"When do you take up your abode here as Mrs Shelley Polling?"

She shrugs her shoulders.

"Choose a pleasanter topic," she says, abruptly.

"I thought my choice a remarkably happy one; will you ask me to your wedding?"

He bends his head down nearer to her as he says this. She makes him no answer, and to his surprise there are tears in her eyes.

"Miss Field. Flora! Have I offended you?"

She shakes her head, gives a little gulp, still does not speak, but allows one tear to drop.

"Do forgive me," he says imploringly, and—she is rarely attractive, and he is only

a man—he takes her hand. She looks up at this. Giving his hand a reassuring pressure, she says,—

“You haven’t offended; but you’ve hurt me. How *can* you speak of my wedding with—with any one else, after what you said last night?”

“What did I say last night?” he asks in bewilderment.

“You said, and I thought—oh! *how I hoped* you meant it—that I ‘maddened you.’ I thought it meant you—loved me.”

She droops her head low as she whispers these last words, and in another moment Val fears that she will fall upon his manly breast, and never rise from it till he has promised to be her husband.

“My dear Miss Field,” he says in the most deterrent accents he can command, “pray dismiss such a notion from your mind; I meant that you perplexed and

puzzled me. I am not such an unscrupulous rascal as to dare to insult the *fiancée* of my friend by telling—or implying to—her that I love her.”

“Not even if you did, and if her happiness depended on your doing so?” she murmurs; and now her whole frame is heaving, and the tears are streaming through the tender fingers which half conceal her face.

It is hard for a man to be brutal to a very fascinating woman who is not his wife. Val Romilly's instincts are all tender, and his feelings are warm. Pity him out here, under the copper-beech, with a syren luring him to love her, and no help at hand.

“What would you have me do? What may I dare to say to you?” he says vehemently, and how ardently all the while does he long for Mabel's sweet saving presence.

“Do as your heart dictates. Say what you feel,” she says, dropping her hands and

bringing her dark velvet eyes to bear with all their soul-fraught force upon him.

“Temptress!” he whispers; but there is no reproach in the word, or in the tone in which it is uttered.

“Oh, Val!” she cries, starting to her feet, and leaning her little graceful form against the end of the seat, perilously near to his shoulder. “Oh, Val, this morning’s work will make me the happiest girl in England or—break my heart!”

There is a pause. It is not love which is tossing his heart and soul about in this turbulent fashion; he knows that well. But what a winning, witching creature she is, and if she loves him and does not care for Shelley, perhaps he may as well give the reins to his fancy, and—

“Mornin’, sir,” a gruff voice says at this juncture, and as a rough fisherman tacks round the corner, Val draws a deep breath, and feels that he is saved.

"What are you doing here?" Flora cries imperiously. "Do you know these are private grounds?"

"*What*, missus?" the old sea-salt asks humorously, as if his stolid fancy was tickled by something.

"Private grounds! Don't you understand?" she goes on, loudly and clearly, for she is enraged at the inopportune interruption, and burning with a desire to be revenged on somebody.

"Private grounds be they? And whom be you to tell me so? I'm in here in pursuit of my calling, missus. I'm a fisherman, and I'm watching for a school o' mackerel; that's what I'm doin', watching a school o' mackerel; in pursuit of my calling; that's what I'm doin'."

"Go and watch for them down on the sea-wall, then," Flora cries, her face in a flame now, fury possessing her; for time is precious, the post will soon be here,

and by it Val may learn that he is Earl of Wokington, and that her affection is not as disinterested as he has supposed it to be. "Go and watch for them on the sea-wall; don't come here prowling about, frightening people; you're trespassing, and I'll get Mr Polling to have you taken up"—

"Mr Polling ain't such a fule, young missus," the man says, with a lazy sneer. "Mr Polling, he knows what's our rights, and one of our rights is 'free to go wherever a corpse has been carried;' there's been many a corpse washed up here, and rested on that 'ere bench where you sit now, and then borne to its last home, 'way yonder in Porthhallow Churchyard."

The man's voice grows mournful, and loses every touch of insolence as he says this, for one of the corpses that has been washed up here was that of his own brave young son—and! well, it is not in pur-

suit of his calling that he comes so often to this spot.

The change to the minor key touches and softens Flora, though she is ignorant of the cause of it. But the girl is permeated with the real artist feeling, and answers to the lightest touch that strikes her heart through her ears.

"I'm sorry I spoke so crossly just now," she says gently, and then she goes up and puts her delicate little hand into the fisherman's horny one, and questions him a little about the wrecks that have been off this point, and makes such a picture as she does this, that Val feels that he could love her desperately if it were not for Mabel.

Presently the old man drifts away from them, and Flora subsides into her seat again.

"If I ever come here to live, I will have this seat taken away, and this corner changed utterly," she says.

“Why?”

“Because it will remind me of you if left as it is, and I shall not want—I shall not *dare* to be reminded of you.”

“You wish to forget me—and this happy hour?”

“Don’t mock me; it’s not a happy hour for me, and you know it,” she bursts forth. “I have shown you my heart, and you—have broken it!”

He rises statelily and sadly, making no attempt to caress her in loving-kindness, or to touch the quivering lips which are held so near his own. Perfectly he portrays respect for her—whatever he may feel, and she believes that her last *coup* has succeeded when he says,—

“I am in your hands, Miss Field; after your last words I can but ask you to direct my fate. My poor fortunes do not warrant me in *asking* you to share it.”

“Letters, letters, such a lot of them

for *you*, Mr Romilly," Edith cries, coming dancing forward with a bundle of them ; "and look ! one addressed to your uncle, the Earl of Wokington, care of papa ! They must think he's staying here."

The tension is almost too much on Flora as Val takes this letter, and exclaiming, "It's from my uncle's lawyers," breaks the seal and reads that his uncle is dead, and that his (Val's) orders, as successor to the title and estates, are awaited by his obedient servants, Sarl & Rugden.

How does he feel ! His heart, his reason, his taste all tell him that Mabel ought to share these honours with him. But a foolish impulse has made him place his fate in Flora's hands, and he does not doubt but that she will mould it to her own passionate, ambitious wishes.





CHAPTER VIII.

“THAT’S THE REASON WHY!”

IT may be broadly laid down, as a general rule, that a woman should never carry anything in her pocket which she does not desire to pull out and exhibit to the general multitude.

Unluckily for herself—or rather unfortunately for the fulfilment of her desire to be in with the new love before she is off with the old—Flora Field has had that telegram in the pocket of the striped dress ever since she received it; and now, as she walks back to the house with Edith, at the latter’s suggestion—

"in order that Lord Wokington may read his letters undisturbed" (Miss Polling suggests) — Flora pulls the compromising piece of paper out with her handkerchief.

It flutters away, breeze-borne on to a certain yellow rose-bush, when it is caught and impaled upon a thorn.

By-and-by, Aunt Nellie, passing that way in search of some of the young people with whom to discuss this wondrous news of their guest having bloomed into a peer thus unexpectedly, catches sight of the fluttering thing, releases it, smooths it out, and reads it naturally.

"Then Flora knew of this yesterday, for this is the only telegram that has come to Pollington for the last week," the good lady says to herself, aloud and excitedly, as she stands staring at the condemnatory document. "Why didn't she tell us?" she continues thoughtfully.

Then her good honest face flushes as she remembers that Flora had implied that it was from a dressmaker.

"It was a lie! But why did she tell it?" Aunt Nellie goes on speculating; then she sees Val coming, and forgetting that he is a "party in the case," she tells him of her discovery, and asks him what it means.

He takes it from her, and glances over it, and a sense of disappointment fills his breast. He is not "in love" with Flora, but he likes her, and, to say the least of it, he has been thrilled this morning by the undisguised preference she has shown for him. After all, has this preference been for his rank and place, not for him, Val Romilly, himself? If so—

"What a fool I've been to put my fate in her hands," he thinks. "What a trickster to have got entangled with. What an ass poor Shelley is to think

of marrying her. What a bigger ass I am to have let her make me think she likes me."

All this time Aunt Nellie is watching him attentively.

"What does it mean, Mr Romilly? That's what I ask. Wouldn't it have been but natural for her, when she got the news that you'd come into your title and property, so nice and friendly as we all are, to tell us, and not make a secret of it; and pretend 'twas from a dress-maker?"

He nods his head assentingly, but he isn't listening to what she says. He is only wondering how he can take his "fate" out of Flora's hands.

"By Jove! she'll nail me to my words," he says aloud; and when Aunt Nellie stares at him aghast, he explains that he really doesn't know what he is talking about; he has been sitting in a warm

corner, and the sun has affected his head.

"I wonder if he is thinking of our Edith," Aunt Nellie fondly soliloquises, as he walks away (the fatal telegram safely in his pocket) to the house. "Sweet bride she'd make, to be sure. Might be married the same day as Shelley, if Flora would consent to have it here; and dear Mabel Sutherland should be chief bridesmaid, and by-and-by she could go and stay with Lady Wokington. Such a nice change for her. Well, I must go and see about luncheon. If I turn my back for a minute something is sure to go wrong."

Hurrying into the house, she meets Flora hurrying out of it.

"I've dropped a piece of paper out of my pocket, Aunt Nellie, between the corner seat and the house; have you seen it?"

"The telegram do you mean?"

Flora nods, and tries to smile.

"Why, yes, my dear; I picked it up—and— Why, Flora, what made you keep such news to yourself, and pretend 'twas only from a dressmaker?"

"I didn't want to see the adulation of his lordship set in a minute before it was necessary," Flora says scornfully.

Then she walks on, forgetting to ask for her telegram, or, perhaps, thinking that she will not give it further importance through further mention.

"Stupid old bungling Aunt Nellie will trot this little incident out on every occasion for the next fortnight," the girl thinks, as she walks along meditatively. "And Mabel will be making a subject picture of it; and Lord Wokington will be laughing at me in his sleeve, unless I contrive it so that any ridicule that falls on me falls on him also."

If she could only see him again, now, before Shelley returns, and anything gets

bruited abroad about that luckless telegram! She knows that he came into the house just now, but one of the servants tells her he has gone out, and to herself she admits that she is going to search about and try to hunt him down. "If that poor, unintentional little marplot Edith hadn't danced in with the letters when she did, I should have been fairly engaged to him before he got the great news, and then *nothing* would have made him back out of it; but now? Yes, though, after all it was a definite offer! a man can say no more than he did. 'I am in your hands, Miss Field; after your last words I can but ask you to direct my fate.'"

"Be you a play-actress?" The words seem to proceed from the bowels of the earth, but in reality they only proceed from the lips of the old fisherman, who, in justifiable pursuit of his calling, is now scanning the mighty ocean from a position

he has taken up on a gorse-covered bank which divides the garden from the wilderness.

"No; I'm not — by profession," she laughs good-temperedly, "but I suppose we all do a little bit of acting at times."

He nods gravely and slowly in assent to her proposition; then he says,—

"I didn't know whether you'as all a set of tip-top strollers or not. I see a play once, time I went to Plymouth, and right glad I was I didn't take my missus to see it. 'Romeo and Juliet' they called theirselves, and bless me if Juliet didn't go on in a way that made me feel right down shame-faced, that her did; a-callin' to the young man to come back to her, and a-flinging herself about like a raging lunatic. I thought you might all o' you be in the same line o' life when I heard you all a-hollerin' last night, and saw you sweet-hearting this morning, as bold as you please."

The man pauses to laugh hoarsely ; and Flora, who has ceased to be amused since the conversation has taken this personal turn, tries to pass on. But she is arrested by his next remark.

“Now the other one—the young painting lady from Porthallow—has got hold on 'un, and gone sweethearting up into the wood. I thought it might all be in the play you see, if you was play-actors.”

Just at this moment—before she can fly on into the wood and verify the truth of the fisherman's statement—Shelley's hearty voice shouts out her name, and presently he comes out on to the tennis-ground from whence he can see her. She has no appeal ; she must go back and join him, and leave Lord Wokington to fall a prey to Mabel—if he dares.

“What's this ?” Shelley asks as she joins him ; “Aunt Nellie meets we with a cock-and-bull story of Romilly having come

to the title, and of your knowing all about it yesterday. What does it mean, Flo? I don't understand it."

"I never attempt to understand your Aunt Nellie's rambling statements," she says contemptuously.

"But *did* you know it yesterday?"

"Well! Yes, I did. An officious friend, who is a worshipper of rank himself, thought I was the same, I suppose, and so sent me a telegram telling me that Lord Wokington was dead."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Really, Shelley, I can't pretend to assign any reason for what I did, and for what I left undone. It came into my head not to say anything about it—"

"But you *did* say something," Shelley persists, looking distressed; "you said it was about a dress; you needn't have said that, surely, darling."

"If your going to pry into everything I

do, and cavil at everything I say, we had better make an end of it, and break off our engagement," Flora says coolly. Her heart is not interested at all in the matter, and she begins to find it dull at Pollington—at least, her prophetic soul tells her that it will be deadly dull when Val goes.

"How you're altering to me, Flo," he says sadly and tenderly ; but Flora does not melt to the pleading strain.

"I'm not altering," she says pettishly ; "it's you who are changing from a nice, frank, dear fellow, to a prying, suspicious, masterful sort of person ; and you're doing that at the instigation of your mischief-making old aunt."

"Don't abuse Aunt Nellie ; she may blunder sometimes, but she never tries to make mischief," he says warmly ; but Flora is determined to break chains that have become wearisome to her, and so she goes on aggravatingly,—

"And, while we are on the subject of your relations, I may as well tell you that I don't like your father's habit of being fulsomely subservient to me one day if I please him, and furiously savage with me the next, if I displease him."

"My dear girl! he never has been that last to you," Shelley says deprecatingly.

"Well, I tell you this: he raved the other day because the mare had a sore back, and I know he thought I had given it to her; besides, Shelley, to tell the truth, I can't face the idea of living here; the air makes me ill, completely demoralises me, and I know I should find it dull, and when I'm dull I'm horrid to live with — oh, horrid — you can't think how detestable I make myself."

"Flo," he interrupts, "you needn't give me any more reasons. You're tired of me? You wish to be free?"

"I wish to have it broken off by mutual

consent," she says. And he looks at her so fondly, and tells her that he can have no part in it; if it is to be broken off, it shall be her act and deed entirely."

"Will you tell me one thing? is there any other fellow in the way?" he asks.

And she tells him, "That she wants her freedom for her freedom's sake—to save herself from being questioned in this way."

"If it must be so, it must be; but I hope to Heaven I shall never see you again, Flora; if I do, it will break my heart," the poor young fellow says, and Flora tells him soothingly,—

"Oh no; you'll get over it *much* sooner than you think, and probably fall in love with that nice, clever Miss Sutherland, who will be quite happy and contented here with the scenery and the sea-gulls."

Then she leaves him to his own devices, and waits upon circumstances to bring her into collision with Val.

Fate favours the brave ! And Flora is very brave. Before her discarded lover has recovered from the first shock of surprise and mortification sufficiently to be able to move away from the spot where the blow has been dealt him, Flora finds herself face to face with Val.

“ You are looking for me ? ” she says, assuming what she knows is *not* the fact. “ What a heartless wretch you must think me for not having answered your *dear* request at once ; but how could I ? I was taken by surprise at hearing the news your letter brought to you. I was asked by ‘ Val Romilly ’ to direct his fate, and perhaps ‘ Lord Wokington ’ may wish to share it with some one nobler, and richer, and prettier than I am.”

She pauses, and he says softly,—

“ You were taken by surprise, were you, at the news I have had to-day ? ”

“ Surely, yes. We all were,” she

answers, in those clear, honest tones of hers that, together with the steadfast gaze of the beautiful dark eyes, convey the impression to the most obtuse mind of her being exceptionally frank and single-minded.

She pauses for a moment, and then, as he remains silent, she adds,—

“Does Lord Wokington endorse the offer made to me by Val Romilly? If he does, I am the happiest girl in the world.”

“Lord Wokington does *not*,” he says, with cool decision, and the blood rushes furiously over Flora’s cheek and brow.

“You think lowly of your late self, indeed, my lord,” she says sarcastically. “I was good enough to be Mr Romilly’s wife, but am not worthy to be Lady Wokington; of course, being only a girl, I cannot compel you to give me a reason for your dishonourable and extraordinary conduct. As I said before, you wish to

share your altered fortunes with some one richer and prettier than I am; but it's contemptible to have changed so soon, pitiful to have your head turned by your own title."

"Do you want to know the real reason of my cancelling my offer, Miss Field?"

She bows her head in assent.

"This is the reason why," he says, holding out the crumpled telegram for her inspection. "When this was put into my hands this morning, after the letter came, I knew you for a scheming, unscrupulous girl. I should be a fool indeed—a greater one than even you thought—if, after gaining such knowledge of you, I placed my honour and happiness in your hands."

"Don't preach. I hate amateur sermons," she says, shrugging her shoulders and smiling scornfully.

She is wounded to her pride's core,

but she will not show her pain. After all, mingling with her ambitious yearning to be a peeress, there has been a good deal of love for the man who could have made her one. Now there is nothing left for her but—to make it up with Shelley.

“Are you not going to congratulate yourself and me on the demise of my anything but esteemed relation?” Val finds an opportunity of saying to Mabel, who has sedulously avoided meeting his eyes, even though she has taken a stroll in the woods with him as duly reported by the old fisherman.

He makes this remark to her, coming upon her unawares, as she sits in the library, trying to work out her sketch of the morning.

“I congratulate you heartily on having come to your own without let or hindrance. As to myself, his death makes

no manner of difference to me. I shall never go back to my uncle's house now ; I have tasted the sweets of independence, and probably shall end my days at Porthhallow," she says, keeping her eyes fixed on her painting, but not daring to use her brush, lest he should see how her hand trembles.

"Then I had better sell one of my other places and buy one down here," he says quietly.

She laughs and shakes her head.

"You had better not talk nonsense, Lord Wokington. Consider—you are going away in half-an-hour ; let my last impression of you be a respectful one."

"But I must have a place here if you mean to live here chiefly," he persists. "I can't be in one place myself and have my wife in another. It's you who are talking nonsense, Mabel dear, when you suggest such a possibility."

So they settle it.

What passes at the next interview between Flora and Shelley need not be narrated. It is enough to say that Flora is defeated, and finds that she has not even Shelley to fall back upon. At the cost of a good deal of poignant pain to himself, Shelley casts off her trammels, and acts up to the spirit of the song which declares—

“If she be not kind to me,
Farewell to her, whoe’er she be.”

Miss Field accepts her defeat with her customary skill and grace, and Shelley allows her to give her own version of the matter without any revision on his part. When old Mr Polling pleads for his son, and entreats that the engagement may not be broken off, even offering to “buy a place for Shelley in one of the Midland counties, since she avows she could not live in Cornwall,” she puts a halo of glory round her own head by protesting she

“will not be so selfish as to rob him of his son,” and finally retires from Pollington, much loved and lamented by Shelley’s father and sister and aunt.

Six months after these events Godolphin Polling’s regiment comes home from India, and is for a time quartered at Plymouth, where Flora is staying with an old school friend, the wife of an officer.

At one of the military balls, Captain Polling is introduced to “the best waltzer in the room,” Miss Field; and without at first associating her with the girl of the same name who had a brief engagement with his brother Shelley, he gets fascinated by the famous flirt.

By the time he does identify her with his brother’s old flame, he is a gone man, and as Flora’s objections to living at Pollington have vanished by this time, she shortly returns there in triumph as the bride of the heir of the house, which

is soon ordered entirely anew by her strong young mind and hand.

Shelley gives up the home-farm, and goes after all to the distant country, where he is not haunted by the memory of what his brother's wife once was to him. Aunt Nellie is tenderly ousted from her position, and dropped—she hardly knows how—into a nice little house in the village, and Edith is taught that Mrs Godolphin Polling is indeed the mistress of the house.

But even when she has achieved these ends, Flora is not quite happy, nor will she be till Lord and Lady Wokington come to stay as *her* guests at Pollington, thus giving her the right to expect reciprocal hospitality from them, and the coveted honour of being presented by Lady Wokington, and having the *entrée* to the “best set.”

THE END.



AN IRON WELCOME.

“**M**RS TREHEARNE is coming home to-night.”

“The Squire is bringing his wife home at last, and we shall see what we shall see!”

“The master’s a bold man sure ’nough, and the lady’ll need a stout heart too, if so be all that’s told about the place is true. But then, it’s a pack o’ lies, most likely; but the housemaid up yon — she’s Jane Latey’s daughter from other side of Gweep — do say that she can’t make Miss Trehearne out at all now. She

never says a word, good or bad, about her brother's wife, and goes on just as if she was to be mistress up at Trehearne all her life."

These are a few of the remarks and conjectures that are bandied about among a group of loitering, lazy, lounging, simple minded and mannered, and withal bitterly curious villagers as they sun themselves against the railings that surround the village pond, on which are disporting languidly the village ducks and geese.

The hamlet of Polverrow has not had such a legitimate source of local excitement for many a long day as this; namely, that Mrs Trehearne is coming home to-night. It was shaken to its centre ten years ago when the Squire and his stern sister came home after many years' absence, accompanied by foreign-looking beings who spoke strange tongues which were unintelligible to the Polverrowites. And it

was much exercised in spirit two years ago, when the rumour came down, through Jane Latey, that the Squire had gone up to London and married a beautiful grand young lady, and that, in consequence of this feat of daring, Miss Trehearne was like a deranged person, "fit to tear her hair."

But this news that is reported now, exceeds all that is past in thrilling interest, and Polverrow gives itself unhesitatingly to conjecture and idleness for the whole day.

There is a great deal of the *dolce far niente* about those who are indigenous to the soil in this beautiful far western land. They lean about in an unhasting manner whenever there is anything to lean upon, and they look dreamily out into the great space of sea or of moorland, as the case may be, rather to the neglect of mere details immediately around. Essentially a

people who are averse to new movements, and antagonistic to new ideas. Sure, perhaps, but undoubtedly very slow.

The railway has not reached Polverrow. The moorland heights look on Polverrow, and Polverrow looks on the sea. On this sea, and by this sea, Polverrow chiefly lives.

Life is not very full of incident in this briny solitude. The principal events are the goings-out and comings-in of fishing boats and smacks. The chief topics of conversation are the mackerel-seines and the catches of the prolific pilchard; and the chief occupations of the inhabitants of this stolidly-contented hamlet are the building of boats and the making and mending of nets.

There is a little vicarage, occupied now by a bachelor *locum tenens*, perched on a hill at the back of the village, and half-a-mile further up the valley there is Tre-

hearne Place. Besides these, there is nothing resembling a gentleman's house to be seen for many miles. And to this desolate region Mr Trehearne, the scarcely known squire of the village, is to bring his wife to-night.

A faint hope lightens the hearts of all those around the duck-pond, that Jane Latey may come down to the village shop in the course of the day, and give them the latest news of Miss Trehearne's moods and sayings. That these latter will reveal anything that Miss Trehearne does not desire to have revealed is beyond their wildest expectations, but they feel that it is important that they should be posted up in the utterances of the only person who knows why Mr and Mrs Trehearne are coming home now, and why they have stayed away so long.

By-and-by, quite late in the afternoon, when the hope that she would come has

waxed faint and low, Jane Latey's well-known best hat, surmounted by a blue bow and a yellow feather, appears in sight. Fashion penetrates even to Polverrow, but she behaves here in a graceless, flighty, lunatic way that she is never guilty of in the haunts of men. Hence Jane Latey's hat and bow and feather, the work of local talent, which has been cruelly deceived and fooled by the mischievous goddess Fashion.

At sight of Miss Latey, the group round the duck-pond brightens up, and one or two of them address her with the cordiality people are apt to display towards the person who can gratify their heart's desire.

"Where be gwain', Jane, in such hurry like?" one of the women says heartily, and then she goes on to tempt Jane to linger, by speaking of a certain hot loaf and cup of tea which are in her cottage hard by.

Jane halts irresolutely, and murmurs something about Miss Trehearne wanting some big nails and screws from the shop at once.

"House all ready for the new missus then?" another woman suggests encouragingly.

"Yes," Jane avows with pride, "the house is all ready, and as beautiful as anything she" (Jane) "has ever seen in all her born days!" which is doubtless true.

"Even to the table being laid for dinner, with spoons and forks and glasses enough for thirty, let alone they three that are going to sit down to it," Jane goes on.

"And what brings 'em home now, all of a sudden like this?"

"Miss Trehearne is close as wax, and hasn't opened her lips to living soul about the matter."

A mild-eyed, affectionate-looking woman standing near, timidly throws out the suggestion that "Miss Trehearne must be main glad to have her own coming back to her again," but her remark is received with derision. It is Jane Latey's opinion, founded on close observation, that Miss Trehearne would sooner have heard that her brother's wife was at the bottom of the sea than that she was coming home to-night.

"But no one knows what Miss Trehearne really means and feels but Miss Trehearne herself," Jane says, hurrying off to get the nails and screws, as a vision of Miss Trehearne in an impatient mood presents itself before her.

Meanwhile the "Flying Dutchman" is bringing the master of Trehearne and his wife westward rapidly.

There is nothing in her appearance, as she sits in a corner of the carriage en-

vironed with scent-bottles, and fans, and dust-cloaks, and cheap editions of popular novels, to account for the intense interest which has been concentrated upon her during the last two years. A pretty, well-dressed woman, with hazel eyes and hair to harmonise with them, she has not much force or feeling or thought in her fair smooth face. Why should her coming or going make a stir at Polverrow and Trehearne?

Her husband sits opposite to her—a rather sad-eyed gentleman, with an irresolute mouth, and a languid, delicate manner that would befit his sister better than her own. As the boundary-line between Devon and Cornwall is passed, he grows perceptibly nervous, and at length, as she makes no comment on the fact, though he has acquainted her with it, he says,—

“Helen, look about you, dear. Tell me

if you feel that you will be happy in this region which is to be your home?"

"We haven't come to the place yet," she says, looking up hastily with gay, good-humoured unconcern; "you've told me I have to drive ten miles from the last station to Trehearne, so I haven't come into 'my own countrie' yet."

"Nell, love it as your own country; be happy here for Heaven's sake! But for you I would never have come back."

"Why?" she asks, surprised a little, but not deeply interested.

"Why? Because from my childhood the home at Trehearne has been a cold and chilling home to me. I have never known love and freedom in it. I have never known peace—"

"Roland!" She is unfeignedly interested now, and directly she wakes up and throws off her air of fashionable languor, she is as charming as well as a

pretty woman. "Roland ! I thought your sister adored you ? She is always writing to you, and always watching your interests ?"

"But she does not love me, Nell," he says sorrowfully. "She has given her youth and her own hopes of happiness to my welfare, because I am the present representative of the family ; but she doesn't love me, and, poor child, she'll hate you !"

"I'll pull down the hate, and build up love and confidence in its stead."

"The task is beyond you, Nell," he says despondently, and then for a few minutes he takes himself to task wearily and bitterly for doing or saying aught that may depress her, or give her an unfavourable impression of his old home and his own race.

"Have you no other relations, Roland ? Do you two stand alone ?"

"We two stand alone," he says stiffly.

"Being the only brother and sister, you ought to love each other," she says meditatively, and then she clears up, and with a bright "Well, anyway, I hope she'll like me," Mrs Trehearne settles to her book again, and neglects the scenery.

It is seven o'clock before they reach Trehearne. A few enterprising spirits in the villages have mooted the idea that it would be a pretty thing to meet the Squire at the boundary of his estate, take the horses out, and, like good and true Polverrowites as they are, draw the master and his wife home.

But the plan falls to the ground, not through being negated by any master-spirit, but simply through the natives' inability to act with promptitude and decision when the time is limited. So the Squire and his wife drive up to the entrance-doors of Trehearne in peace and comfort.

The old hall is vast and imposing, but it is badly lighted, and Mrs Trehearne, going in with perplexed mind and bewildered vision, cannot quite discern the difference between the effigies of men in armour of the past and the rigid row of servants in the present. But her movements are graceful, and her voice gracious, as she says a few well-meant words, which convey no one definite idea to the minds of her hearers. And then she looks at her husband and says,—

“I thought your sister lived here, Roland? She can’t know we have come.”

Hesitatingly, and as if he were almost afraid to do it, the master of Trehearne turns to the primmest of the grim servants and asks him,—

“Where is Miss Trehearne? Will you tell her we have arrived?”

“Miss Trehearne is in her usual place, sir,” the man replies gravely. And some-

thing in his foreign accent and forbidding mien gives Mrs Trehearne the feeling that this place is very strange, and will never have the home-like charm for her.

"I will go and see Priscilla first, Nell, darling," Mr Trehearne says, "and prepare her for meeting you. She has been the mistress here for a long time," he adds apologetically; and then, fearful that he may have hurt the sensitive heart of his wife, he goes on to say something about "Priscilla little knowing how gently she will be superseded."

"I will go to my own rooms. I suppose I may do that before your sister comes," Mrs Trehearne says in not unnaturally piqued tones, and instinctively she singles out Jane Latey, the broad honest-faced Cornish girl, to be her guide, in preference to the two or three sombre-looking Italian women who have sedulously kept themselves apart from the

natives during their long term of residence at Trehearne.

The house is grander far than Mrs Trehearne has ever pictured it, for her husband has been strangely silent about the home of his ancestors. As, led by Jane Latey, the mistress of the manor passes up a splendid flight of stairs, and along a corridor that in length and luxurious appointments is worthy of a place in a palace, she wonders at herself for feeling so little elation.

"Are these all bedrooms?" she asks, pointing to the doors they are passing, and Jane tells her,—

Yes, all of them, and there's a sight more rooms in the wings and back of the house than she (Jane) can reckon up.

She reaches her own suite of rooms at last. "Madam's apartments," they have always been called since the present master's mother passed the latter years

of her life in rigid seclusion in them,—
“grieving about her eldest son who died
abroad, they do tell,” Jane adds; and
pretty, bright, light-hearted Mrs Trehearne
looks with tender interest at the rooms
where the sad, bereft mother mourned for
her son.

“Grand and beautiful—far, far grander
than even I had hoped for; but they don’t
seem like home to me,” the young wife
says, as she seats herself at an open win-
dow and looks down on the whitewashed
cottages and brown-tanned sails of Pol-
verrow.

Meanwhile, Roland Trehearne seeks his
sister, where he has been told he shall
find her, in “her usual place.”

She is a tall, large-boned person, mas-
culine in mind and appearance, but neither
coarse nor vulgar. As her slim, hand-
some, refined-looking brother comes into
the plainly furnished “office,” in which

for years she has transacted all the business connected with his large estates, the idea would strike a stranger that this brother and sister had changed costume and character in jest.

Miss Trehearne throws down her pen as her brother enters, and, without rising from her chair, holds a large, capable hand out to him.

“So, Roland, you have come, in spite of my warnings and wishes?”

The words are unkind, but the way in which they are uttered is not. Nevertheless, Roland Trehearne looks pained.

“Nell pressed the point of coming home, and what excuse had I to offer for keeping her away?” he says deprecatingly.

Miss Trehearne shakes her head impatiently, and says,—

“You should have told the truth—that this house is one in which she will never know happiness.”

"I could not tell her the truth. I dared not do it, Priscilla, for your sake as well as my own," he pleads.

Then he sits down, buries his face in his hands, and asks,—

"Is—is this burden as likely to last as when we last spoke about it?"

"It is!"

The stricken master of the house cannot repress a groan as the brief answer falls upon his ears. The sound seems to rouse his sister to wrath.

"You helped to lay the burden upon yourself, though you were fully aware of all the responsibilities it entailed. Why come and moan to me about it, Roland? Remember it is ever present with me. I minister to all its wants; I live under the shadow of its drear depressing influence! I ask you, is it my place to do this more than yours?"

"It will kill me," he cries, rising up

and speaking with a passionate vehemence. "My poor Nell, my darling girl! What a home to have brought her to! Do, if you have a spark of womanly feeling in your breast, go to her, and say words of kindness and welcome, even if you don't mean them, Priscilla. Don't let the poor girl feel the blight of this secret; she at least is innocent!"

"And you would hint to me that I am not?" Miss Trehearne says slowly. "Well, Roland, I will stand even that reproach for your honour's sake."

"For the sake of your accursed family pride, you mean."

"Perhaps I do," she says, a dull red flush mounting to her weather-beaten, bronzed cheek. Then she takes a couple of keys from a box, and advancing to a door at the far end of the room, she says, as she unlocks it,—“Have you the courage to come and see our burden?

Be a man, Roland; it is as hard for me to witness it as for you. Yet I have to face it hourly."

He rouses himself with an effort, and strings himself up to the cruel task of following her. Ten minutes after he comes back into the office again, with his face of such an ashen hue that his sister says,—

"Take some wine before you rejoin your wife. Your blanched face tells tales, Roland. Take wine and courage."

He obeys her in this, as he has obeyed her in other things all his life, without demur. Then he goes back to "Madam's apartment's," and strives to make his "darling Nell" feel that nothing unkind is meant by his sister's indifference.

They meet at dinner by-and-by, at a table set with massive gold and silver plate and deeply cut antique glass, and are served with rare wines and daintily dressed viands. The artist hand of a

French cook is plainly discernible in everything that is placed before young Mrs Trehearne. But, for all the splendour and dainty delicacy of the feast, she has no appetite, and seems out of spirits.

The table is a round one, placed at one end of the vast dining-room or hall, and so appointed that it is difficult to discern which is the head of it, until a stately carved oak chair, with a back like a throne, is wheeled up for Miss Trehearne.

Then the spirit of the young wife rouses and asserts itself.

"I suppose I take my own place in my own home, do I not, Roland?" she asks, lightly advancing to the chair of state, and putting her hand on its arm, while Miss Trehearne frowns at her.

"If you take my seat, you shall take my other duties as well," Priscilla says gruffly. "My brother will be able to tell you what they are to-night; some of

them may not be pleasant to you, but your husband will share your labours, I am sure, and I will go away and have what I have not known for years—peace!”

With a shudder, Mrs Trehearne draws back.

“While I stay here I will never, never interfere with your sister, Roland,” she says proudly; then she adds, while a sob almost chokes her utterance, “but take me away from this home where I have had such an iron welcome. Take me away before it breaks my heart!”

They do not talk much after this during dinner, nor are their tongues loosed after it in the drawing-room.

At nine o'clock Miss Trehearne takes a hard, cold leave of them for the night, and soon afterwards, tired and disheartened beyond expression, Mrs Trehearne goes to bed.

It is broad moonlight when she wakes. She has disregarded the orders which Jane Latey tells her have been issued, to the effect that all the shutters in "Madam's apartments" are to be tightly closed, and the rays stream into her room, illuminating it uninterruptedly. Looking out of the window, she sees some portions of the vast mansion, of which she is the mistress, jutting out picturesquely. Inviting ivy-covered corners peep at her. Dark alcoves overhung with creepers awake her curiosity. She is broad awake, and her husband is sound asleep. It would be a shame to disturb him to satisfy her curiosity respecting these nooks and corners and alcoves. And yet, why shall she not gratify it? Is she not the mistress of the house, the wife of Trehearne of Trehearne?

Noiselessly she slips out of bed and dons her dressing-gown and slippers. In

another moment she is out in the corridor, speeding along towards the staircase.

The spirit of adventure is upon her. The interior of the old house looks so weirdly grand by moonlight that she longs to see what the outside of it will look.

Down in a cloak-room leading off the entrance-hall, she finds a big fur wrap. With this around her, she feels that she may go out in safety into the fresh sweetness of the moonlighted summer night.

It is not an easy task to get out of the Trehearne mansion without the aid of the giant keys which secure it every night. But Nell Trehearne is not easily balked of her purpose to-night. Finding that exit through the doorways is impracticable, she investigates the windows, and at length in the anteroom to the dining-hall she finds shutters that she can unbolt, and a window that she can unclasp.

In a few minutes she is standing in a grass-grown court, a dim secluded place, into which even the moonbeams find it hard to penetrate.

"How Roland will laugh at me when I tell him of my restlessness and uncanny ramble," she says to herself, and she goes on to construct a prettily-coloured little sketch of her nocturnal adventure for the benefit of the breakfast-table the next morning.

Trehearne is curiously built. Odd-looking towers spring up in unexpected places, and there are open-air spaces left in an apparently aimless manner that makes Mrs Trehearne very angry with the prodigal architect of the long-past period in which the place was built. She is just beginning to retrace her steps through some of these superfluous mazes, with the serious intention in her mind of speaking to her husband in the morning on the

subject of reclaiming these wasted spaces, when a light flashes into her face that does not come from the moon.

Stepping hastily back into the black shade of a projecting piece of wall, she looks up to the point from which this new light is streaming ; looks up to an open window, at which stands her tall brawny sister-in-law, wrapped in a military cloak that makes her look more masculine than ever, and with her a stooping shrunken form in an indescribable garment that gives no hint as to the sex of its wearer.

In a moment all the stories she has ever read—from Jane Eyre to Barbara's History—of mad wives concealed in impossible places in their lawful husbands' houses, rush into her mind. The next minute she loyally acquits Roland of any such sin as this. But her heart is sore and troubled, and the gaze that is searchingly directed to the open window is an anguished one.

Presently Miss Trehearne and her companion move away from the window back into the interior of the room, and Nell sees them no longer. But it is a matter of moment to her now to find out all she can, and she knows that she has only herself to depend upon.

So she sits down on a piece of rough stone that is in the court, and taking keen notice of its position, she learns off by heart the position of every window and piece of stone or brickwork that can be seen. Then, marking the window from which the lamp-light is still streaming, she makes her way back through the window, up the stairs, and along the corridor to her own apartment.

When she finds herself safe and by his side again, she cannot refrain from waking up and confiding in her husband.

Accordingly in a few moments that bewildered gentleman is listening in sore distress to the story of her wanderings.

“Who can your sister have concealed there? Roland, do you know anything of this romance of hers?”

Mr Trehearne is silent.

“I won’t believe that you can know anything about it. Tell me that it is your sister’s secret and not yours, and I’ll never ask another question,” she says proudly, and he bends his head miserably and answers,—

“My darling, I cannot lie to you; the secret is mine as much as my sister’s, and—I cannot tell it you.”

The following day Polverrow is convulsed to the centre of its being, or, as it expresses itself, is “shook all of a no-how like,” by the news conveyed to it in an ecstasy of emotion by Jane Latey,—

“Mrs Trehearne, the master’s wife, have took herself off without un, and master be broken-hearted like, and Miss Trehearne like the Evil One himself.”

The information is only too correct. The master of Trehearne has been staunch for once in refusing to obey his wife's wishes. It is in vain that she has wept, implored, entreated him to tell her what this mystery is. His sister has commanded him not to reveal it, and with the feeling that he is a craven for so doing, Mr Trehearne has obeyed his sister.

Mrs Trehearne, with youth, brightness, desire to please, longing to forget, and plenty of money in her favour, goes to London, where society does not accord her an iron welcome by any means. And it might be written that her end is likely to be anything but peace, were it not that soon after her arrival in London a little son smiles upon her, and the woman who fears that her boy may have to blush for his father, is resolved that he shall not have to do so for his mother.

“ If I am not the legal Mrs Trehearne, I can

at least be an honourable and good woman," she tells herself, and so she lives on an embittered life, for a few weary months, during which she refuses to hold any communication with Trehearne of Trehearne, unless he will clear up the mystery which has separated them.

By-and-by she hears that he has gone abroad again, and guesses that his sister has resumed her solitary, arbitrary reign undisputedly.

But she does not guess—poor, harassed, anxious woman that she is—what remorse and vain yearnings are swelling her husband's heart.

"He has a shameful secret, and I and my boy—his son—are the sufferers. We will bear our own load of sorrow alone, my son, and never make a sign."

So she says to the baby Trehearne, whom she has had christened Trehearne, in "order that he may have some right to the

name," as she tells herself bitterly, when the days grow long and weary, and neither the husband nor the explanation come.

At last, after a few dreary months of waiting have nearly washed the iron welcome from her mind, Mrs Trehearne finds that there is balm in Gilead still.

For her husband comes to her with his confession on his lips.

And his confession does not invalidate her claims. His is a story of temptation and wrong-doing, of sorrow and sin, but not of shame for her or for her boy.

It is this. That eldest son, whose loss his mother—the "madam" of Trehearne—had deplored so deeply; that elder brother and rightful heir, whom all men believed had died abroad, is dead now, after years of incarceration in the house of his fathers as a madman. And the grim sister who has devoted her life to the maintenance of the honour of her race, finds herself spoken of

as a person who has been privy to the concealment of a dangerous maniac, because for the sake of her name's honour she has enclosed her hopelessly mad brother within barriers of ignorance and foreign tongues.

Verily, Priscilla Trehearne has borne a hideous burden for the sake of the honour of her race. It has been her object that the world should think the heir of Trehearne dead rather than mad, for it is a tradition of the Trehearnes that only so long as they are right in mind, body, and estate will they hold their lands.

But this bad spell is broken now, for Roland Trehearne lives at Trehearne happily with his wife, who is the mother of his son, and Aunt Priscilla looks after the dairy and poultry, and is happier and gentler than she has ever been before in her burdened life.

For the afflicted brother, who is laid to rest in Polverrow churchyard, has ceased to be either a burden or a shame, and the

rooms where his broken-hearted mother wept for him, and conjured her daughter Priscilla to "save his name at any cost to herself or Roland," are occupied by a mother now who never thanks God so fervently as when she thanks Him for the great gift of healthy reason to her son—the little Trehearne Trehearne of Trehearne.

THE END.



DR WALSH'S MISTAKE.

MR WALSH — “the Doctor,” he was called in the district—had been settled in Aylesborough ten years, when the three Miss Conyers came to live in the place, and, as became his position in the parish, he called on them at once.

His verdict, delivered at the Squire's dinner-table that same evening, was that the “Misses Conyers were three as delightful young women as he had ever had the pleasure of meeting,” and on the strength of this strongly - expressed

opinion of his, Mrs Granger, the squiress, declared that she "should call on them."

Now, in Aylesborough society, a call from Mrs Granger was held to be quite equivalent to a presentation at Court. Indeed, some loyal Grangerites went so far as to declare that Mrs Granger was much more particular than Her Majesty. At any rate, whether this was the case or not, her visits were highly esteemed, and the people on whom these blessings were bestowed sat in the seat of the scornful above those from whom they were withheld.

Mrs Granger was a little, blue-eyed, fair-haired morsel of a woman, whose skin had been her glory in the days of her youth, and who, even now, when she was judiciously prepared for the evening, was spoken of by her friends as "a dazzling blonde." Not that there was much in her, either physically or

mentally, to dazzle those of moderately strong vision, but when one's gaze has been concentrated on a local star for some time, the eyes are apt to grow weak.

In dress Mrs Granger affected the Dresden China style. Of a morning she would be quite pastoral in chintzes in which blue and pink were deftly contrasted, and her skirts were always cut short enough to show her beautifully-shod little feet. Of an evening the materials employed were richer, but the effect was much the same, as she clung to the flounced petticoat, saque, and train of our great - great - grandmothers, modified to suit the artistic requirements of to-day.

She was a very great lady, indeed, in the estimation of all Aylesborough; but this is as nothing compared to what she was in her own. Looking at herself from her

own point of view, she saw herself a social potentate of the greatest magnitude, and naturally, therefore, she thought it crass ignorance on the part of others who were blind to what was so clearly perceptible to her.

Unfortunately, she carried out her design of calling on the Miss Conyers before these ladies had been given time to be inoculated with the local mind, or local opinions; and as they were benighted enough to look upon her as a mere average mortal, and to regard her call as merely a piece of politeness paid by one gentlewoman to another, she was rather inclined to set her face against them, and to relegate them to the second stratum of Aylesborough society.

Mrs Granger did not say it in so many words; but what she meant, and what all who knew her understood that she meant, was, that until the Miss Conyers

fully acknowledged her supremacy, they must be contented to revolve in the second circle.

However, this intention of hers relaxed when she found that the Conyers' sisters were the great source of excitement and curiosity to all the most influential male minds in the neighbourhood. It was impossible to give a dinner, or to go to a dinner in the region round about Aylesborough, without hearing the relative charms and beauty of these three graceful ladies discussed. What people are apt, for want of a better expression, to call "a nameless something" hung about them all. But in physique, manner, and tastes, they differed widely.

The elder of the three was about eight-and-twenty at this juncture—a generously-moulded young woman, of good middle height, with a fair, oval face, delicately featured, and lighted up by a

pair of well-opened, clear, golden-brown eyes. Masses of the same tinted golden-brown hair were tightly wreathed round her head, and her manner fitted her appearance well, in that it was rather large and generous, and steady too. She was the head of the house, the manager of the household, and the general director of the family,—a woman whom you instinctively felt, at a glance, was designed by nature to be a happy, happiness-giving wife and mother.

But up to the date written about, circumstances had defied nature, and Aylesborough felt itself justified in looking upon Bessie Conyers as an old maid.

The second sister, Sybil, was a tall, slender, waxen, pale, aquiline-featured, fine drawn, black-haired and eyed, Spanish-looking girl of twenty-five; delicate, sensitive, unpractical, gifted with rare talents, not one of which was properly cultivated,

or pursued with any degree of persistency. Naturally enough, with this rather irregular and defective order of mind, went a certain sort of irregular and defective health, and though her temper was good in the normal state, it was capricious and fretful at odd times.

In fact, Sybil Conyers was a creature of impulse, and as such rather trying to the others occasionally.

The third, Ella, was a bright and lovely blue-eyed girl of twenty, fair as a lily, and quite as graceful. A buoyant-natured, happy-hearted girl, not particularly clever, but gifted with a great grace of making those about her happy; fond of flowers and lawn tennis, of dancing, and every other form of pleasure in which the young delight, but always satisfied to rest and be happy at home when the Fates forbade that she should be taking her pleasure abroad.

It soon became known in Aylesborough that these three sisters were, comparatively speaking, alone in the world. That is to say, they had no near relations to interfere with any of their plans of life. They each had a satisfactory competence of four hundred a-year, and their three united incomes, as it was, enabled them to live in very good style in this country village, to which they had come with the best letters of introduction women can have—beauty and money.

Their little establishment was a model one. Bessie was her own housekeeper; and a cook and couple of housemaids were quite sufficient to carry out the management indoors, under her direction. They had a little pony-carriage, and a “useful man” united the offices of groom and gardener in his own person. Altogether, even Mrs Granger pronounced the establishment to be faultless, “as far as it

went," and was good enough to concede that it was very nice and unassuming of them not to try and make it go further.

It was in the fair early spring that the three ladies came to Aylesborough, and for a while—after that first little hitch about Mrs Granger—all went well with them, and they sailed along serenely over the social sea.

In return for the hospitalities that had been accorded them, they gave pretty picturesque lunches and small garden parties, and even adventured upon a dinner party or two, which latter Mrs Granger assured them was quite a departure, and was more than was expected by reasonable people like the Aylesboroughites from unmarried ladies.

But in this matter, as in most others, they were guided by themselves more than by her, and the little dinners were given—whenever the Miss Conyers felt inclined to give them.

Meantime, Mr Walsh's intimacy with the ladies, whose worthy merits he had been so prompt to recognise, flourished, and was nurtured by the kindest treatment from them.

There was only one drawback to good-looking, clever Mr Walsh's popularity in Aylesborough, and that was that he was a bachelor. Over and over again had Mrs Granger introduced the likeliest young women to his notice. But he had withstood them all. No one whom he had hitherto seen combined those requisites of birth, beauty, breeding, brains, and money, which he deemed essential in the future Mrs Walsh. But he found them all in blue-eyed Ella Conyers.

Just as he was beginning to find it needful to his well-being that he should see her every day, and to plot and plan in order to enable himself to do so, fate favoured him, and he fancied fortune

smiled upon his suit. Sybil was taken ill; he was called in to prescribe for her, and her sister Ella was in unremitting attendance upon her!

Could anything have been more fortunate?

That he had always been an earnest, attentive, conscientious man in his attendance on the sick and suffering, every one allowed. But he displayed these qualities more strikingly than ever when Sybil Conyers became his patient. The poor languid, capricious girl, who wearied of what she longed for the moment she became possessed of it, would have exhausted the patience of a naturally far more patient man than Mr Walsh. But in her case, his patience, forbearance, and ever-active interest appeared to be inexhaustible. He would visit her frequently, and prolong his visits beyond the period allotted by custom. And during these

visits he would discourse to poor, handsome, suffering, petted, and pettish Sybil of music and painting, of new books and magazines, and of all the arts she loved so well in theory, and practised so spasmodically.

It was patent to her sisters, and to all their friends, that Sybil had found a sympathetic soul in their doctor, and though they had no desire to see their circle broken yet, the elder and younger sisters congratulated one another, each declaring that she felt Sybil would be a happier and therefore a healthier woman when she married and had a strong, good man's hand to regulate and direct her.

As for Sybil herself, she was supremely happy in the unavowed but still (as she thought) pointedly shown affection of Mr Walsh.

Long ago, in her days of very early girlhood, she had had a sort of semi-

romance, but this was quite a different thing, she told herself. Here, heart not only would beat to heart, but cultivated taste would respond to and enlarge cultivated taste, and he was true and staunch. A real man! One on whom her sisters, as well as herself, would do well to rely!

Moreover, his personal appearance was gratifying to her artist eye. A good-looking man in every acceptation of the term, well grown, and, more than that, well "set-up," with something soldierly in his erect figure and firm, steady gait! The hearts of many of his lady patients had throbbed expectantly about the handsome, popular doctor; but not one of them fluttered so wildly on account of him as did the heart of Sybil Conyers now.

And all the while this was growing out of bounds on her side, an equally unrestrained affection for her bright younger

sister, Ella, was springing up in Dr Walsh's heart.

That the girl herself was quite unconscious of his passion he felt sure, but he did hope and believe that Sybil saw it, and encouraged him with sympathy that would become sweetly sisterly in him. So the delusion on either side grew, and deepened, and strengthened; and both Bessie and Ella were in daily expectation of the announcement from Sybil that Dr Walsh and herself had settled it.

Mrs Granger, who in some occult way or another managed to be tolerably well informed as to how the wind was blowing in the houses of all her neighbours, had heard of Dr Walsh's indefatigable attention to his patient for some weeks before she permitted herself to interfere. Then, as nothing had come of it, she told herself that the time was ripe, that the moment had come when it behoved her to take action.

Dr Walsh she regarded as a superior and devoted vassal of her own, therefore the subject of his marriage had always held a fair amount of interest for her. It had always seemed to her wise and good that he should marry, but unconsciously she had assumed that he would consult her as to his choice before he made it. Accordingly, when the public voice proclaimed that he was paying marked attention to the second Miss Conyers, and that unquestionably he had intentions, Mrs Granger felt as if he were usurping some of her supreme authority, and tacitly denying her right to settle his affairs for him.

This was not a healthy state of things, and the Queen of Aylesborough resolved to reduce him to order without delay.

Accordingly, she sent for him, and received him with a gentle chilliness that perplexed him.

"No," she said, in answer to his fervent inquiry, "I am not ill—not bodily ill, that is ; but I am very much annoyed by something I have heard from several people !"

She looked at him so meaningly when she said this that the blood surged up into his face. He felt convicted at once of having betrayed his feelings about blue-eyed Ella to that many-headed monster, the common crowd, before he had honourably declared himself to the object of his adoration.

"What have—several people ventured to say to you that can have caused you so much annoyance ?" he managed to stammer out ; and Mrs Granger replied sharply,—

"That you and Sybil Conyers are going to make a match of it ! Now, I did flatter myself that you held me in sufficiently high estimation to have confided such an intention to me before it became public property—"

"*Sybil* Conyers," he gasped out ; "are people mad?"

The moment before, Mrs Granger had felt there was madness in such a scheme, but as soon as Dr Walsh repudiated it thus scornfully, his self-constituted patroness felt that it was the best and only thing for him.

"*Sybil* Conyers is a remarkably handsome and talented girl," she said representatively. "I have found her a most agreeable companion, though conscientiously I cannot aver that I consider her *thorough*; still, I always take pleasure in her society, and, if she becomes your wife—I mean *when* she becomes your wife—I shall hope to see a great deal of her!"

All this Mrs Granger said in her grandest little Dresden china manner, and all this was as bitter as gall to Mr Walsh.

"You have been misinformed," he began rather nervously. It is nervous work flying

in the face of a report that is likely to be well received by the powers that be.

"Misinformed!" she said incredulously; then added, in tones of perfect confidence, "Oh dear no! people know better than to 'misinform' me! Now, be sensible, and confess yóur folly openly, and I'll condone it," she added, with that air of searching banter for which she was so remarkable in Aylesborough.

"But I have not to make confession of the folly you—you dread," he said hesitatingly. "Charming and handsome as Miss Sybil Conyers is, I should not think—I mean I should not presume to ask her to share a lot which is not one of absolute rest and luxury; she is a hothouse plant—a keenly sensitive one, too. I should not venture to transplant her into my hardier air; no! it is her sister—"

"Miss Conyers will never look at you," Mrs Granger interposed rather crudely,

not to say rudely. "Why, she is the mainstay and guiding star of the family; her sense of responsibility is far too strong for her to dream for a moment of encouraging you; the family would fall to pieces without her, whereas, if you married Sybil, you would secure a most delightful and sympathetic companion for yourself, and relieve Bessie and Ella of a great nuisance."

"Your recommendation is well-intentioned, but rather faulty in execution," he said drily. "I am sure you will be glad to find that I aspire neither to Miss Conyers, who cannot be spared by her family at all, nor to Miss Sybil, who can be spared too easily; but I am going to be rash enough to propose myself to Ella."

"To Ella!"

Written words cannot convey the scornful incredulity which Mrs Granger infused

into the tone in which she uttered these words. For the first time since he had moved in her sacred circle, Mr Walsh realised that his all-powerful, and hitherto polite friend, could be an intensely rude and unpleasant woman.

"There is something unflattering in your evident disapproval," he said in mortified accents, which he strove vainly to render cool and unconcerned.

"Disapproval! Disapproval is a mild word to express what I feel; every one will be aghast at your contemplating such a delusion."

"But no one, save yourself, will know what I have contemplated, until the fond delusion is an accomplished fact," he said a little defiantly.

"You don't mean that Ella has given you encouragement, *really*, do you?" she asked; and before he could answer, she went on, "I shall be intensely surprised

if she has ; still, girls are so blind to their own interests sometimes, that she may have done so thoughtlessly."

"But, my dear madam," he exclaimed impatiently ; "why, if I am so admirably suited to the one sister, am I to be regarded as so foolishly presumptuous for aspiring to the other ? Sybil, you say, is clever, accomplished, handsome, and sympathetic ; what more can you say of Ella ?"

"Oh ! Ella isn't clever at all ; but she's young and lovely, and far too brilliant for the position you could place her in," Mrs Granger answered, ruthlessly. "Do think for a moment of the incongruity of it all. Ella's is such a holiday nature, and that, you must admit, is not the nature which your wife ought to have. Now be guided by me ; I am your oldest and best friend here. Give up thinking of Ellen, for your thoughts of her will only lead

to perplexity and confusion ; and make yourself and everybody else happy by marrying Sybil ? ”

“ You speak as if it was expected of me, as if I had given her and others reason to suppose that she was the object I had in view,” he said miserably ; and Mrs Granger was quick to detect the wavering spirit, and to play upon it.

“ I am afraid your attentions have compromised her, poor girl. Yes ! it's quite as hard for me to say these words, as for you to hear them ; but I am a true friend, saying what all the others are thinking, and what no one else has the courage to say.”

“ Compromised her ! ” he repeated in amazement.

“ Yes, won her heart, and compromised her, unless you gratify that heart's craving. However, I have said all I mean to say, and will only add that I regret you should

have betrayed the trust and confidence these poor things have reposed in you."

"Upon my word, I'm too much bewildered to know what to say, or how to act," he stammered; and Don Juan himself never experienced such keen remorse as assailed the soul of the innocent Aylesborough doctor at this moment.

The first-fruits of this conversation were cruel and bitter. In a vaguely repentant and penitential spirit, Dr Walsh stayed away from the Conyers' house for two whole days!

On the third day, he was called in hurriedly. "Miss Sybil was much worse, and she wouldn't allow Miss Ella to nurse her any longer!" was the message brought by the trustworthiest of the trustworthy maids; and in a paroxysm of contrition Dr Walsh said of himself, "I am the man."

Evidently these two sisters, hitherto so warmly attached to one another, had quar-

relled, and quarrelled about him, and the sick and suffering girl had separated herself from the sister who had been her greatest comfort, because she saw in that sister a rival.

He could hardly bring himself to face them! Still duty claimed him, and he obeyed the call.

Rather to his surprise, Miss Conyers received him with the cordial warmth she had displayed towards him ever since his love for Ella and professional devotion to Sybil had brought him more frequently to the house. Whatever the rumours current in Aylesborough, it was evident that they had not reached the ears of those whom they most closely concerned.

"Sybil is much worse, I am afraid," she began anxiously, "and so impatient for your visit. I have been telling her that your professional time is of great value, and that she must not expect you

to devote so much of it to her, when she was convalescent, as when she was really ill; and the mere fact of my saying so seemed to bring on a relapse."

"I hope we shall soon pull her through," he said, somewhat awkwardly, and then he was taken into the room where Sybil, looking very pale and prostrate, was lying on a sofa, with a sketch-book and pencil in her hands.

"I am glad to see you employed," he said cheerfully, and she flushed up at his words, or with the delight his presence brought her, and began to show him what she was doing, and to talk about it, in a way that put Bessie outside the conversation most effectually.

Presently Miss Conyers feeling this, and knowing well how it was with her sister, rose, and murmuring something to the effect that her presence was needed elsewhere, went away out of the room, leaving Mr Walsh to his fate.

Then, in the strength of her weakness, and of her sure conviction that he had only been staying away because he was not sure that she responded to his feeling for her, Sybil dropped her sketch-book, and the poor pretence of being interested in it, and said,—

“These days that you have not been here have been so long; and so sad to me! Why have you stayed away?”

“I have thought it better to do it,” he replied composedly; “I feared—I mean, I fancied, that is—”

“That I *only* regarded you as my doctor,” she whispered, putting one hand out till it rested on his, while she covered her eyes with the other. “Perhaps I thought so too, till you stayed away.”

She did not see the look of blank misery which overspread his face as she said this; had she done so she might have paused in a course in which only her capricious

fancy and vague yearning for some one stronger than herself, and all her own to rely upon, and *not* her heart and soul, were interested.

"But now you have come again, and I will be well and happy," she added, looking up with a more radiant expression on her handsome pale face than usually reigned there. "Ella says I am a fool to care so much for your presence—"

"Ella says so?"

"Yes; but then Ella is in the first flush of her youth and strength, and does not know what it is to care for any one but herself," Sybil went on; and hearing these things of Ella, Mr Walsh despondently allowed matters to drift beyond his control.

How it came about he was never quite sure, but when he rose up from the side of Sybil's sofa, he was engaged to her, and she was declaring that the fate of a

seaside village doctor's wife was, in her estimation, the sweetest that could be contemplated.

It was astonishing what a cure the novelty and excitement of her position wrought in her. Sybil grew quite social and animated, and even exerted himself to the extent of falling into the family ways, instead of disarranging and interrupting them as she had hitherto done.

She was ready, in a matter - of - fact sensible way that was quite a new feature in her character, to discuss her engagement, and the responsibilities that would devolve upon her in her married state, with her family and friends—going into the questions of what it would be becoming for her to wear, and to do generally with a minuteness that was eminently practical.

“I shall start with a large stock of print and other washing dresses for morn-

ing wear," she said to her sisters; "as a country surgeon's wife, I must always look ready to turn my hand to anything; and yet I should like to be fit to be seen. Print dresses, exquisitely made, and beautifully got up, will fulfil all the requirements of a morning."

"And be as expensive as anything else; don't get them with a view to economy," Bessie suggested.

"And don't marry Mr Walsh with the idea that he wants you as a sort of housemaid, or general utility person," Ella put in; but Sybil assured them that she knew far better than they possibly could what would be required of her in her new position.

Mrs Granger saw nothing but good in the projected alliance, however, and that was something gained. Sybil and the squiress became inseparable, and Mr Walsh tried to derive consolation from the fact.

Indeed, Mrs Granger was good enough to try and save him the trouble of settling his wedding-day.

"You know people begin to long for the sea, and flock here in June," she said to him; "therefore you ought to be married early in May, so as to pick up all the stray patients."

Now, May was the next month!

"Isn't that rather soon?" he asked.

"Soon! not at all. Sybil, dear, good girl that she is, has been most prompt in making her preparations; and really, between ourselves, I think the sooner you take her away the better for her happiness. Ella is *not* the affectionate sister she used to be to Sybil. I am sorry to see it, but I must admit that Ella seems to be filled with envy of her sister's happiness. I suppose she thinks that her superior beauty and grace entitled her to the first matrimonial honours. I tell her

she is sure to make a better match, but she has turned sulky, and makes no reply to my remarks."

Thus candidly and coolly did Mrs Granger discuss his future wife and sister-in-law, and Mr Walsh had to listen, for his heart misgave him painfully as to the real cause of the change in Ella.

When the wedding-day was fixed, and the preparations for it were moving on apace, he said to his handsome betrothed, who was in good, steady, unvarying health and spirits now,—

"Your two sisters will be your bridesmaids, will they not?"

"No, I think not. Ella said something to Bessie about it, I don't know what, but something that has made Bessie propose that I have four little children friends of ours—the Montague-Davenports—for my bridesmaids; it will be a pretty sight—so simple—won't it? I shall have them

dressed in white sicilienne Mother Hubbard clothes and poke bonnets."

"I'm glad of it," he said, breathing a sigh of relief. He meant that he was glad that Ella was not to be her sister's bridesmaid, when she ought to have been his bride. But Sybil thought that he was glad that the bridesmaids were to wear Mother Hubbard clothes and poke bonnets, and so she was satisfied.

It was the week before the wedding. Mrs Granger was greatly engrossed by her self-imposed task of conning the visitors' books at the library every day, and one morning she was rewarded for all her arduous labours by coming across the name of a well-known artist, a man whom she had met the season before in town.

"We must get up a dinner for Kyrle Pemberton," she said to her husband; "he's such a charming fellow, and so successful and rich, that I want him to fall in love

with Ella Conyers; then we shall be sure to go to their house every season, and meet every one worth meeting in art and literature."

"I must say that you're not guilty of the unpractical folly of doing good without hope of reward," he laughed, and so the dinner was decided upon, and—Mr Walsh's fate altered.

There was no word said to the three Miss Conyers of the distinguished artist whom they were invited to meet. But Mrs Granger had laid her plans well.

As a matter of course, Mr Kyrle Pemberton would take his hostess in to dinner, but on the other side she would plant Ella, whose profile was as lovely as her full face.

"As an artist he must admire, and as a man he will soon love her," the astute lady told herself; but she was destined to be disappointed.

The whole party were assembled before the successful painter made his appearance. As he came into the room, and all eyes were turned on him, Sybil Conyers, who was sitting apart from the others with Mr Walsh, gave a low cry, and, rising up, walked half across the room towards the stranger, then stopped, overwhelmed with embarrassment.

Simultaneously, he turned and looked at her, and, even before he had time to advance towards her with outstretched hands, and an exclamation of heartfelt joy, they all felt that these two had met before, and parted *not* for want of love.

“Do you understand it?” Mr Walsh asked Bessie later in the evening, glancing as he spoke at his bride-elect and the stranger; and Miss Conyers answered honestly,—

“I can’t help seeing — what you see; but I have only heard Sybil speak of him

as a casual acquaintance. I am sorry he has come."

"And I am glad that he has come, before it is too late," Mr Walsh said, gallantly preparing to bear his loss like a man.

Meanwhile the pair under discussion were striving to disentangle some threads in which their lives had got caught and involved.

"When I saw you last, I was a poor, much kicked-about football of fortune," he said, and she slyly flushed at the recollection of that time "when he saw her last," and answered,—

"And now your pictures are a feature in the Academy each year, and you are famous?"

"Have you seen my pictures?"

She shook her head.

"My health has been bad for a long time, and my spirits have been even worse."

"You were happy enough when I saw you last—as bright as you were beautiful."

"Not *quite* at the last, if you remember," she said.

"Who is the good-looking fellow who was sitting by you when I came in?"

"Our—doctor, Mr Walsh."

"Only your doctor?"

"He was more—he was the man I was going to be married to next week, when you came in," she said falteringly. "Now, he is not that; he never can be that now."

"No; for I am that man, Sybil," he said, with emotion. "I should have been that man long ago, but I saw nothing but starvation before me when we parted, and I couldn't ask you to share that."

"The disappointment will be very bitter to Mr Walsh; but he is a good man, and will get over it," she said, with grievous pity in her handsome face, and then she remembered that there was something

flagrantly unconventional in her demeanour as seen from the outside both to her new and her old lover.

"I shall say nothing to him to-night," she whispered to Kyrle Pemberton; "the blow would be too heavy. We were to have been married next week."

But, a little to her surprise, Mr Walsh asked her to let him walk home with her that night alone! And, still more to her surprise, he led her down to the beach, and then, looking out over the midnight sea, he said,—

"You have something to tell me, some secret which it hurts your honest soul to keep, and yet, for my sake, you are going to burden yourself with it till to-morrow."

"Oh, my friend! I wish we had never thought of love and marriage," she burst forth. "My eyes are opened; I liked and respected you—I clung to your intellectual companionship, but— To-night I have

been made to know that I do not love you."

He could not help his heart leaping exultantly, as he thought, "But Ella does!"

"And I shall go on loving you very dearly, Sybil; as the wisest and best of sisters, you shall always have a warm place in my heart, even though another claims the first place in yours," he said, in turn.

And then he hurried her home with unromantic speed, and left her at the door with an absence of emotion or retrospective feeling that astounded her. Left her, feeling himself a free man!—free to offer to go into servitude to Ella.

Mrs Granger was "more annoyed than she could express," and said so openly, when, in a few days, a double wedding was announced as likely to come off in the Conyers family. That Sybil should

become the famous, rich Kyrle Pemberton's wife, while lovely Ella was tamely contented to be only Mrs Walsh, was a disarrangement of the right order of things to which the Squireess of Aylesborough could never reconcile herself.

"Such apathy! Such want of all proper ambition!" she said regretfully. "Why, Mrs Walsh might have been a professional beauty without any risk, if she had liked; but the cards got badly shuffled before I had the dealing of them, and so she is only a country doctor's wife—and quite happy!"

THE END.



A BREACH OF PROMISE.

THERE is a good deal of excitement in Bodmington to-day. It seems to be in the air, and the air gets into everything and every place. Bodmington is ordinarily restful, not to say monotonous. But it generally casts off sloth and bestirs itself on market-days, when it puts on a most festive and fascinating appearance for the benefit of the neighbouring farmers and their wives and daughters, who are wont to declare that there is more life in Bodmington than in any other place they can name.

But to-day, though it is market-day, the prevalent excitement must strike the most unobservant as being something quite extraordinary and out of the common. There is quite a concourse of people assembled together at Berringer's, the chief confectioner's; the market-place is alive with animated groups who are not discussing the prices of crops and cattle; and Miss Mowbray's showrooms are filled to overflowing.

Indeed, Miss Mowbray, the popular and tasteful little milliner, may be said to be the centre of attraction this day. She can tell more about this astounding approaching wedding, the mere rumour of which has thrown Bodmington off its balance, than anybody else, for she is confidently reported to be making the wedding-dress—some even say the whole trousseau.

She is a delightful little woman this popular little milliner—quite as pretty and

charming as she was ten years ago, when she came and took the taste of Bodmington by storm in the capacity of show-woman in Mrs Mayne's (her predecessor's) shop. A bright sweet-faced little woman of thirty-five or thereabouts, gifted with a lively voice, and endowed with an exquisitely graceful figure and way of carrying herself.

During these ten years which she has passed here, she has become quite a local power, and has more than doubled the already good business to which she succeeded on the death of her old employer, Mrs Mayne. No dress is well reputed in Bodmington and its vicinity unless it has Miss Mowbray's indisputable stamp upon it. And the "best worn" bonnets at the local races, the "best worn" flowers at the local balls, must be arranged by Miss Mowbray, or they are regarded as worse than useless—they are actually vulgar!

She has attained this just celebrity, not only on account of "prompt attention to your highly esteemed favours," which all tradespeople pledge themselves to give, but on account of a certain sweet, blithe, gentle dignity which marks her as a gentlewoman even in the eyes of those least accustomed to the article. All—or nearly all—her customers like her, and are interested in and sympathetic with her, though they know absolutely nothing at all about her beyond this—that she lives in Bodmington and makes lovely bonnets.

But to return to the abnormal excitement which is prevailing at Bodmington to-day.

The cause of it is being fully discussed in Miss Mowbray's showroom by an eager and animated group of country ladies, who would, one and all, gain more information on the all-absorbing topic, if they were not so desirous of seeming to be able to afford a little in return.

"I couldn't have believed it possible that the first I should hear of Beatrice Alleyne's marriage would be in Berringer's shop, instead of from her own lips," buxom little Mrs Harcourt says in aggrieved tones. "We were schoolfellows for years, and she was bridesmaid, and now I hear of her approaching marriage for the first time from strangers, who can't even tell me the name of the man."

"It's very close and underhand of Beatrice."

"It's not what I should have expected from her father's daughter; all the world was welcome to know what he did, dear old man. There was no concealment about him; but Beatrice takes after her mother, who was a nasty dark foreign-looking woman. I always say that Mrs Alleyne's stand-off ways lost her husband the election the last time he stood. Bodmington would never have turned him out, if his wife had

shown a more friendly spirit to the neighbourhood."

All the while this conversation is going on between her patronesses, Miss Mowbray is silently occupied in arranging some winter floral decorations in Mrs Harcourt's bonnet.

This work of art accomplished, to the satisfaction of its owner, she appeals to Miss Mowbray, no longer fearing to distract the artist's attention till her own cause is served.

"They say you are making the whole of the trousseau. Is that true, Miss Mowbray?"

"Quite true, madam."

"Oh, then you can tell me more about it. Who is the gentleman, and what is his name?"

"These flowers a little more to the edge of the brim? Yes, madam. His name is Littleton."

"It's a very sudden affair, isn't it?"

"Miss Alleyne told me two months ago to prepare her trousseau, and ordered a handsome one. She evidently did not wish to have it talked about so long before, therefore I never mentioned it. But this morning she came in, saying all the world might know it now, it was so near; and then she told me the gentleman's name."

"Will they live here? Is he rich? Has he a place of his own?"

These, and countless other questions, are poured in upon Miss Mowbray with almost ferocious velocity. But the well-bred little milliner does not allow herself to be overwhelmed by them. Calmly and quietly she answers each one in her due and appointed season, satisfying them perfectly by her manner, and leaving them to discover by-and-by that her matter has been very insufficient for their needs and desires.

Meanwhile those who have remained in the market-place and streets are faring much better, for Miss Alleyne takes her walks abroad in the afternoon through the most public places, and those who know her well enough to stop and speak find that she has put away all reticence on the subject of her marriage now.

"Yes," she confesses, "she had wished it to be kept quiet till it drew very near, for she dreaded interference from some members of her family. Mr Littleton disliked hearing himself talked about; but now all the world was welcome to know that she was to be married next week, and that she and her husband would come back after the honeymoon and live at Bodmington Place."

"That looks as if he had no estate of his own," some of her friends conjecture, as they congratulate the young owner of the pretty little estate which gives her a

position among the landed gentry of the county.

But Beatrice is too happy to give a thought to their possible conjectures, or to the way in which these latter may cast a slur on the fortunes of the man whom she has enthroned in her heart.

Later in the day, when Miss Mowbray's showrooms are comparatively deserted, Beatrice runs in to look at her wedding-dress.

A wooden frame, shaped liked a headless woman, supports the snowy fabric of satin and lace as gracefully as a wooden frame can, and as the bonnie-faced brunette who is to wear it so soon stands contemplating it, the womanly desire to get and give sympathy on this sweetest of all subjects seizes her.

"Miss Mowbray," she exclaims, speaking in that quick piquant way which she has inherited from her half-Irish, half-

Spanish mother, "how is it that you, who are so — oh, ever so much prettier and more charming than I am, have not found any one to insist upon your loving him and giving yourself up to him as Guy Littleton does me?"

The girl—spoilt little darling of circumstances as she is—has quick perceptions and an intensely affectionate heart. Now, the moment she has uttered her thoughtless words, she bitterly repents herself of them, for Miss Mowbray's fair gentle face quivers. The nerves of it seem almost convulsed with pain. However, she recovers herself so readily, that Beatrice has no excuse for remarking upon the temporary emotion.

"If I had been fortunate as you are, Miss Alleyne, I should not be making your wedding-dress now, and as you are good enough to say I have made it better than any one else would have done, why,

we are both well satisfied, I hope, with things as they are."

"I want to ask a favour of you," Beatrice says impulsively, wheeling round. "My aunts and cousins are coming to my wedding, of course, but they don't much like the idea of my marriage, and so I don't want to have them buzzing about me in the morning before I go to church. They will be too much taken up, moreover, with their own dresses and appearance to give a thought to me. There is no one I should so much like to have with me at that time as you. Will you come and dress me? I have neither mother nor sister. Will your kind hands give the finishing touches to the last dress Beatrice Alleyne will ever wear?"

"You dear little pathetic pleader, yes," the other one responds instantaneously.

Then she remembers that she is no longer known to the world as Admiral

Mowbray's daughter Ida, but merely to the Bodmington section of it as the estimable and pretty little milliner, Miss Mowbray.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Alleyne," she adds hurriedly. "I forgot for a moment that we—I mean that I—I mean—" (this very resolutely)—"that I shall like to dress you on your wedding-day very much indeed, for I'm going to leave Bodmington, and I shall like to feel that you are the last person I decked out."

"You are going to leave Bodmington!" Beatrice cries, aghast; "and I shall be vilely dressed by some one else, and Guy will be disgusted with my looks. No, no, Miss Mowbray; unless you're going 'to marry and be happy ever after,' as I am, you know, you mustn't leave Bodmington."

As Miss Alleyne says this, she is flitting from flounce to flower, and Miss Mowbray is saying to herself,—

"Idiot that I am ; it most likely is another Guy Littleton all the time, and I am disturbing my hardly attained peace for nothing."

"Well," she says aloud, cheered by her own view of things for the moment, "since you will have it so, and since I don't suppose I should ever like another place as well, I'll promise not to leave Bodmington."

"And you'll promise to dress me on my wedding-day," Beatrice says ; and then they become absorbed in far weightier matters, such as the colour and cut of the travelling costume, and the advisability of having movable fan-shaped trains made to button on some of the superior short skirts.

Bodmington Place is crowded in the course of a few days after this with a formidable army of uncles, aunts, and cousins, not one of whom knows anything

of the man who is going to carry off their niece and cousin, the little heiress of Bodmington Place, and each one of whom is consequently disposed to believe the worst about him that may be imagined of man.

It is true that up to the present time they have nothing definite to allege against him beyond the fact that he is a stranger to them. Being, as a family, of great importance to themselves and one another, they find it hard to forgive anything like ignorance of all concerning themselves on the part of an outsider. Unfortunately, ostrich-like, they forget that the ignorance may be on their own side, not on that of the offending other one. And so they tell each other in low tones that they hope for the best, of course, but expect the worst from a man who has made dear Bee's acquaintance through any other medium than the proper family one.

Meanwhile the little bride-elect goes on

her way rejoicing, and is buoyantly and unconcernedly regardless of the warnings they waft towards her, and the endless way they have of going on craftily suggesting unhappy terminations to this good time she is having.

“No; she knows nothing of Guy Littleton’s family, and very little of his fortunes beyond this (to her) utterly unimportant fact, that the latter are as poor as they well can be; but he himself is a darling, a king among men! fine and tall, and full of wit and valour. Very probably they”—the uncles and aunts and cousins—“will see nothing in him; they are not educated up to the point of appreciating and delighting in his vast superiority to themselves.

These, and many other similar ones, are the comments Beatrice makes to herself often, and occasionally to Miss Mowbray, anent the coming man, and the attitude

her relations are prepared to assume towards him.

As the day of his destiny approaches, Mr Littleton grows daily less and less deserving of the love and loyal confidence which Beatrice Alleyne is giving him. He has left a friend's house at which he met and won the bonnie Bee, and gone to Southsea, where he is always tolerably sure of meeting a number of old mess-mates and friends.

He is a naval surgeon, and he has won and deserved many professional "plums." He is very popular with men while he is with them, for he has unflagging spirits in society, and a fund of humour that is a very good thing to draw upon during a long cruise. But when he has left them for any time, they say to one another that "he was a queer fish," and seem to have a keener recollection of his eccentricities and peculiarities than

of his better, or even more popular, qualities.

In very truth he is a "queer fish," a far queerer one than any of them know or even imagine. For all his *bonhomie* and high spirits in society, he is a suffering and a haunted man; a man haunted by a horrible dread.

At divers times during his past life this awful gruesome dread has attacked and routed him, upsetting his best resolutions, sweeping away his mastery over himself, nearly destroying his social and professional prospects. Ah, he will never forget the day when the dread was stronger upon him than ever it had been before or since! till now—now on the eve of his wedding-day with Beatrice Alleyne—it is growing, growing hourly; it is stronger than ever!

As in a dream, he finds himself using the same arguments to himself, writing

the same letters, doing the same to hide his flight, as he did on a former occasion.

He cannot marry, he will not marry ! Who is there powerful enough in all the world to make him marry ? Rather than do it, he will cut the service and bury himself alive. Poor little Beatrice, why had he let her beauty and sweetness lure him into this direful difficulty ?

So to happy Beatrice, defiant of all family opposition in her love and confidence, the cruel post bears a letter, written apparently by an iron hand in the coldest blood.

“ A conviction that I am doing the best thing for us both in writing to tell you that I shall never see you again, instead of coming to claim you as my bride, has taken possession of me. Marry some luckier and worthier fellow, and believe me when I tell you that you are well rid of

“ GUY LITTLETON.”

Beatrice receives this letter on her wedding-day, as her wedding-dress is being buttoned on to her by Miss Mowbray.

The stab is too sudden, too sharp ; she cannot bear the anguish of it in silence. With a scream, her poor loving arms go out and cling to the one from whom she is surest of sympathy—to Miss Mowbray, the milliner.

“Oh, my heart, my heart! break at once and kill me!” the poor girl wails, and then she falls frightened and half-senseless, and some of the aunts and cousins strive to “bring her to” by reminding her that “they have always said it, and always thought it.”

But Miss Mowbray soon clears the room of these well-meaning ones, and proceeds to offer sharp restoratives.

“Hush!” she says; “don’t wish your heart to break and kill you; your heart will do yourself and others good service

yet. Let us look at this together. We shall both see it in the same light."

"No, no, no; you never knew Guy Littleton—you never learnt to think it impossible for him to lie to a woman who loved him," Beatrice cries; and for answer Miss Mowbray takes a well-worn letter from her pocket, and Beatrice reads it, and sees that it is almost word for word like the one she has just received, and that it is signed by the same man.

Then, strung up by the indignation she feels that any other woman has the same right she has to lament a wrecked love, and loathe the same wrecker, Beatrice sits down in her wedding-dress and listens to what Miss Mowbray has to tell her.

"It is just eleven years ago that this same thing happened to me," Miss Mowbray begins. "My father had just hoisted his flag at Reymouth when I came out at one of the garrison balls, and being the

admiral's daughter, and young and fresh in those days, I made what they told me was a sensation. At that ball I met Mr Littleton, he was an assistant-surgeon then, and from the time I met him I never ceased to think of him, and he never ceased his exertions to get appointed to the flag-ship.

“He succeeded at last, and soon made himself a favourite on board with every one, especially with my dear old father. I was living with an aunt in lodgings in the town, and it came at last to be an understood thing that, when my father came to dine with us quietly, he should bring Mr Littleton with him in preference to any of the other officers. Very soon we became engaged, and my father gave his consent freely, to every one's surprise, for they thought he ought to have been more ambitious for me. But he thought Guy Littleton a man among men, and you may be sure I did the same.

“I don’t think any girl could have been happier in her engagement than I was; it was a period of perfect poetry written in the smoothest rhyme. He treated me not only as his love and idol, but as his intellectual equal and companion, and made me believe that he should be as proud of his wife as I should be of my husband.

“Our wedding-day came. All the ships in the harbour were decked with flags, and the way to St Andrew’s Church was lined with bunting and flowers. The artillery and marine bands were sent out to play us home after the wedding, and altogether there was as much fuss made about my marriage as if I had been a little princess.

“My case was harder even than yours, I think you will admit, when I tell you that I went to the church, and waited at the altar-rails, with my string of twelve bridesmaids behind me, and my dear father by my side. We waited on and on for

nearly an hour, and oh ! the agony of that waiting. He never came. He never sent a word, beyond this letter, of explanation ; and—can you believe it ?—the crowd who had assembled to cheer us, hooted and yelled at me as I was driven home.

“ His leave of absence had been granted to him before in order that he might go on his wedding-tour, and that served him now. My father was too proud to attempt to stand in the way of his promotion, and he soon got another ship. I believe, at any rate, he never came back to Reymouth, and from that day till the one on which you told me of your engagement, no one has ever mentioned his name to me.

“ Soon after that awful day my father died, and a few months after that I lost the little fortune he had left me by the failure of the private bank in which it was funded. Then my relations began to look coldly upon me, and to continually

urge me to marry impossible people ; and so, after a short struggle with my own prejudices, I determined to leave all of the old behind me, and go to work on a lower rung of the ladder of life. So I came here, and the rest you know."

"We have each had a narrow escape from a madman !" Beatrice says, and there is a stirring ring in her tones which seems to promise that there will be no weak repining on her part about this calamity which has overtaken her.

The affectionate but retrospective-minded relations are not pleasant people to face while her wound is still fresh. Nevertheless, Beatrice faces them boldly, listens to all their conjectures with patience, and steers clear of annoying them in all respects, save this one, that she will neither utter nor listen to aught that sounds like reprobation or condemnation of her renegade lover.

"He is gone, and the rest shall be

silence," she says good - temperedly, but she towers above them in her generosity and power of subduing her own pain as she says it, and they obey her, and soon cease conjecturing about him.

But though Beatrice can be reticent enough when she pleases, she does not please to be reticent about her friend Miss Mowbray's real status in social life. And so soon it comes to pass that the sweet-faced milliner of Bodmington is compelled to admit herself to be as much of a gentlewoman as any of her most aristocratic customers, and though she persists in keeping the shop which has resuscitated her fortunes, still her home is with Miss Alleyne at the Place.

At least it is her home for a time ; but eventually Miss Mowbray buries her dead, and listens to wooing that is, if not as fond as was Guy Littleton's, unquestionably more faithful.

He is a good sort of man, this one whom she marries ; a nice gentlemanly, sensible surgeon, with a fair private property, and a good professional income. It is a drawback to unqualified satisfaction in the latter, that it is derived from his post as head of a private lunatic asylum.

But his private residence is out of ear-shot of the gruesome sounds that are being poured forth, night and day, from that weary bourne to which the mentally unblessed are consigned. And the doctor's wife almost forgets the sad sights her husband must witness hourly in pursuit of his calling, so carefully is she kept apart from all that may pain and grieve her.

By-and-by, as a matter of course, Beatrice Alleyne comes to stay with her.

One night as they are dining, the servant brings a message to his master from the asylum ; brings it with a superior pitying smile.

"You're sent for, sir ; immediately, if you please, sir ; the keepers can't manage Mr Littleton any longer. He'll choke himself, they fear, unless you'll go and hear the defence he has prepared."

"It's a poor clever fellow, a man in my own profession, who was doing brilliantly in the naval service," Dr Walters says in an explanatory way to his wife and her guest. "Such a nice fellow he is, too, but he has gone mad on the point of breach of promise of marriage ; these things generally go the other way round ; we conclude that he has been cruelly jilted, as he fancies he has jilted some one."

Hearing this, they tell him their experiences—all they know of poor Guy Littleton. And this night two human guardian angels sit by the dying madman's bed, and are half recognised and wholly blessed by him.

THE END.



MRS GRONOW'S FRIENDLY EVENING.

CHAPTER I.

FOR upwards of twenty years, Mrs Gronow had lived at the little house midway up the street, on the left-hand side as you entered Valewood from the road that comes straight away from the big sea-port seven miles distant.

Long ago, when first she came, accompanied by a sad-faced, rather plain little daughter of six, Valewood had decided that there was nothing "queer or strange," or in any way wrong in Mrs Gronow, though she was "an up-country person." She had been

a young and rather pretty woman in those long-past days, and as middle age and a less attractive appearance came over her gradually in Valewood, the gossips decided that there was nothing queer or wrong about that either, but just accepted the fact, and treated Mrs Gronow as if she had been born, and married, and widowed in their midst.

"She was a very quiet woman, for an up-country one," Mrs Tippetts at the shop was in the habit of observing to her customers when Mrs Gronow was the topic. And Mrs Tippetts had grand powers of observation, and plenty of opportunities of indulging them in the case of Mrs Gronow, for that lady's little house was immediately opposite the village emporium. "A very quiet woman, with nothing to say to anybody, and giving nobody no call to say nothing to her."

This was high praise, coming from Mrs Tippetts, and was far more flattering than the

verdicts she was wont to deliver about her neighbours, high and low. For instance; the squire's second wife, young Mrs Torrington, never got anything like an honourable mention from the Valewood dame, whose tapes and ribbons and buttons she bought persistently. Yet there was something in Mrs Torrington's fairy-like figure that ought to have won a lenient judgment from the sturdy old west-country woman.

"I don't like them up-country ways of ladies driving like Jehus through the town," Mrs Tippetts would say, when fair Mrs Torrington would drive her pair of cobs smartly away from the ungrateful shopwoman's door. "That's not what the old squire's wife ever did, nor what this man's first wife did, for the matter of that; but, she was a poor chicken-hearted lady, and let him tower over her; this one, for all she's so small and dainty-spoken, would sooner frighten him than he her, I'm thinking."

"I think she would be kind to any one to whom it came in her way to be kind, easily," Mrs Gronow, to whom Mrs Tippetts had addressed her speech, replied gently.

"Ay! that's it—if it came easily. Madam, in her best China manner, would do a kindness, and wonder who was looking to see her do it; for that's what Mrs Torrington is, mam—wain! Wain, as they peacocks that go perking about all over the lawn."

"It's a fine place; no wonder the mistress of it is a proud and happy woman," Mrs Gronow said, preparing to leave the shop. And as she crossed the road to her own little house, her eyes wandered away to the hill-side, where Tor Towers stood in solitary grandeur among the stately trees, and something like a sigh swelled the gentlest and most contented heart in Valewood.

It was in the boyhood of the year that

these things happened, and April was behaving herself properly after the best traditionary manner. She smiled a good deal, and wept a good deal, but did both so warmly and softly, all the flowers came out freely. The primroses in Mrs Gronow's little garden, as she walked up the miniature path to her entrance-door, looked robust, and of vast circumference—as only those primroses can look upon which many sunbeams and much sweet dew have fallen. The little borders were bright with blue violets, many-coloured ranunculuses, pale yellow jonquils, and every variety of the sweet-scented daffodil; and, on the window-ledge, a box of lilies of the valley, in full bloom, shed their fragrance right across the road, even into Mrs Tippetts' shop.

The mistress of the little mansion opened the door, and passing through a narrow passage to the kitchen at the back of the house, set about preparing the early dinner

with the aid of the little serving-maid, who, in rustic parlance, "did" for Mrs and Miss Gronow. Mrs Gronow was an accomplished cook in her way. No one in Valewood could make such pastry as hers, or roast poultry, or make salmon and lobster salads as she did. When she invited her friends and neighbours to a "little friendly evening," it might always be confidently predicted that some new and dainty little dish would make its appearance on her supper-table, and the farmers' wives who visited her wondered why, with all their exceptional dairy privileges, they could never achieve such delicious combinations of eggs, milk, cream, and butter as she did.

Her cookery on this day, however, was not at all on an extensive or elaborate scale; merely a little herb-pie, just enough for herself, her daughter, and Lucy the maid. But a pie that was the work of

an artist in pies — a pie in which the too strong savour of beefsteak was toned down by a judicious admixture of young lettuce and white beet leaves, of parsley, lemon thyme, and sweet marjoram—a poetical pie, the interstices whereof were filled in with prettily-shaped pieces of hard-boiled eggs.

As she made her pie, she stood at the table in the kitchen window, which looked out first into the little flagged yard, where Lucy, like the maid in the nursery ballad, was “hanging out the clothes.” Behind the yard the hill began to slope up towards the grounds of Tor Towers, and, by stretching her neck a little, she could catch sight of the towers themselves.

She did so once or twice as she pursued her work, and then she fell to thinking what Mrs Tippetts had been saying about the young mistress of the place. She brought her reflections on the subject to a conclusion with a sigh, and the words,—

"Ah, poor thing! If I had her prosperity and temptations, I might be vain too."

"What's that about being vain, mother?" a clear voice asked brightly, and as she spoke, a resolute-faced girl—or young woman, rather—of twenty-six came into the kitchen.

"Maud, my dear! I thought you were out; haven't you been for your walk?"

"No. I stayed to finish this," and as she spoke she held out a lappet of Honiton lace which her skilful, slender fingers had just completed. Maud Gronow was an accomplished pillow-lace worker, and her labours in that direction added materially to their slender income.

"How you sit over it; how hard you work," the mother said pityingly.

"No, no, I don't; not half so hard as girls do who go out as governesses and companions; my work is only what rich

ladies play at, after all, and I have the best of it—the pleasure of working it first, and then the pleasure of making money by it. I've worked at this because I want to send it off to Taunton to-day, and then to-morrow I shall feel free to begin Mrs Torrington's order; it's always a pleasure to take things to her, when they're done; she praises one so, and admires the lace, and pays so liberally."

"Yes, we have no reason to find fault with her up-country ways," Mrs Gronow said, and then she told her daughter what Mrs Tippetts had been saying about Mrs Torrington.

"Poor old gossip Tippetts," Maud said; "she says hard things of most people because she thinks she must make a remark to each one of her customers. I'm afraid her scandalous tongue only proves that Valewood is fond of scandal. Now I'm as bad as the rest, for Tippetts has always

been kind to me from the day I came here first, and she gave me goodies."

Then the pie was put in the oven, and the mother and daughter went out of the kitchen that was all aglow with copper stew-pans, and frying-pans, and sunshine, and cleanliness, into the little sitting-room that was steeped in the paler yellow glory of masses of primroses, and of sunshine tempered by white muslin curtains.

And while she looked at the patterns Maud had been designing for the tall flounce and *fichu* Mrs Torrington had ordered, and then at Maud herself, all the mother's ordinary sweet contentment came back to her.

It has been said that when Maud came to Valewood, twenty years ago, she was a plain little girl of six. But, by this time, the dark-eyed, sallow-faced child had developed into a very good-looking girl of twenty-six. Her eyes were dark still,

steady, fearless, frank, hazel eyes that commanded you to rely upon their owner. But her complexion was fair and clear, and delicately tinted with colour, and her nose and mouth were quite well shaped and womanly enough to satisfy the taste of any man. And as for her figure, in spite of that habit of hers of bending many hours every day over a lace pillow, it was as firm and upright as a young poplar tree. In fact, Mrs Tippets was wont to say that "Miss Maud was the straightest maid in all Valewood; and," she added, "I ought to know, for I've supplied all the Valewood maids with stays since ever they wore such things."

"Mother," Maud said presently, when her pattern had been approved, and she was busying herself in clearing away the table for the cloth to be spread, "you're not setting yourself against going to the *fête*, are you? Mrs Torrington says, 'I

shall think it a greater triumph to get your mother here, than I shall to see the Lord Lieutenant and his wife.' Let me trim you a bonnet with some of my own lace."

"Too fine for me, Maud."

"Your own daughter's work too fine for you to wear! Mother, that is nonsense; if that's your only reason, I shall get the prettiest bonnet-shape Tippetts has in her shop, and set about making it this very afternoon. Why, mother, in that bonnet, and your prune silk, and Maltese lace shawl, you'll look—oh! angelic."

Then Lucy, bearing the pie, came in; and as that little functionary had a habit of loitering about, under the pretence of waiting upon them, but, in reality, in order to catch up any stray crumbs of news that might fall from their superior lips, they ceased to discuss the splendour of Mrs Gronow's toilet, and devoted themselves to the business in hand.

"I wonder what Mr Henry will come home like?" Maud said, reverting to the festivities which were to be soon held at Tor Towers, in honour of the return of the heir.

"I wonder," Mrs Gronow said softly.

"He was a handsome young man when he went away at twenty-one; just my age, isn't he, mother?" Maud asked.

"A few months older," Mrs Gronow said curtly.

"I know people used to say, in the village, that Master Henry and I were a little alike when we were both children," Maud said, smiling at the reminiscences; and Mrs Gronow replied sharply,—

"Nonsense, people talked; touch the bell for Lucy. I want the things cleared away that I may get about those curtains for the best bedroom; people begin inquiring for lodgings about April, and I like my rooms to be ready."

"I hope we sha'n't have another lady lodger; that cross thing who was here last year, with her parrot and her pug, nearly ruined my temper," Maud said, as she rose from the table and turned to the window; and as she did so a fly from Taunton drew up at Mrs Tippetts' door.

"Some one asking the way to Tor House, I suppose," the girl said to herself. But a minute after, an elderly gentleman got out of the fly, and, after speaking to Mrs Tippetts' for a moment, crossed the road, and knocked at Mrs Gronow's door.

"I believe it's some one for the lodgings, mother," Maud said, turning hastily, and surveying Lucy hurriedly.

"Oh dear! and those curtains not up," Mrs Gronow cried, hurrying to open the door herself, as Lucy's rather brawny arms were fully revealed in all their beauty at the moment.



CHAPTER II.

IT was some one for the lodgings. An elderly gentleman, with a bushy beard and moustache, grey hair, and a decided stoop, suggestive of debility on the chest, and a habit of hobbling, as if either his boots were tight, or he had gouty tendencies ; but a lodger to be coveted for all that, for he agreed to the terms without demur, had no fault to find with the rooms or the view, and wound up by saying that he should give but little trouble, as he made his own coffee in the morning, and, after that, required nothing till his eight o'clock dinner.

In a very short space of time the lodger

(a Mr Brierly) and all that appertained to him were settled in Mrs Gronow's spare rooms, and the widow came back to make her first report to her daughter.

"I see an easel and a lot of canvases—I suppose he's an artist come down to paint pictures from nature," Mrs Gronow told Maud, and Maud said at once,—

"Then we must get him into the kitchen one day, and show him the hanging woods opposite; do you remember Mr Henry coming in one day and saying if ever he could paint well he should paint the view from our kitchen window?"

"Perhaps he didn't mean it," Mrs Gronow said simply; "we can hardly, on the strength of that, ask this gentleman to come into our kitchen."

"If he's a real artist, he'd not mind going into the coal-hole for a subject."

"Well, I don't know about that, dear; I only know that he's a little too stand-off in

his manner for me to ask him anything of the sort."

Then she told Maud how abstemious he must be.

"Only one meal a-day, and that at eight o'clock; it will be just as if there is no one in the house but ourselves all day; but for eight o'clock dinner I shall have to stir myself about seven. He said, 'I don't require much, but I require that little cooked in a way a civilised man can eat it; no cindery steaks or greasy chops or raw joints of meat for me, you understand.' I told him I did understand, and I thought I could please him, for your poor father was just as particular; what I went through with him with lodging-house cooking in London, no one can tell."

"Mother, you must astonish him to-night. You must teach him at once that he needn't utter any more warnings or offer any more hints to you about his

dinners," Maud said, entering into the subject with that hearty sympathy which had for twenty years made the widow's heart rejoice, whatever cause it might have had to be sad before that date. At once Mrs Gronow felt put upon her mettle in the matter of that lodger's dinner ; but though she did things perfectly when once she set about them, she was not a woman of prompt action. Accordingly, now she sat down, and said rather dejectedly,—

"Such a day, of all others, for him to have come ! It's past three o'clock now, and Barnard won't have anything small left. If it had only been to-morrow, now, I might have got lamb chops, but being Wednesday—"

"Being Wednesday, we must get something else, for we know Barnard won't have killed a lamb to-day. Never mind, mother, I'll walk over to Mrs Simpson's and get a chicken and some cream and fresh eggs."

and I'll coax a sweetbread out of Barnard, and—"

"That will be quite enough, Maud," Mrs Gronow said, recovering her spirits and rousing herself to action. Then she added pathetically, "My dear, we always say a lodger makes no difference to our comfort. This one has to yours already; you meant to get fresh primroses this afternoon."

"I'll do that, too, mother, by the way," Maud said good-temperedly, and ten minutes afterwards she was taking her cheery way through one of the highest hedged and most richly primrosed of lanes, to Simpson's little dairy-farm.

The girl had the eye of an artist. Carelessly as she grouped her flowers and leaves, she grouped them admirably, and by-and-by, when she came home through the village street, her basket filled with a plump pullet, cream in a jar, golden butter, and a

mass of primroses, she made a picture worth looking at, herself.

She stopped at the half-open door of the butcher's shop, and Barnard himself came forward.

"I du hear that your ma have got some one in the rooms, miss," he began, with the interest a butcher is justified in taking in a customer of twenty years' standing, who has always paid her bills. "Now, you'll be wanting some nice little joint for his dinner. I've a leg o' mutton here—Dartmoor mutton, as I'm a living man—Dartmoor mutton, Miss Gronow, that would tempt a 'ermit or a—a cannibal. There ! that it would," Barnard said triumphantly ; but Maud shook her head at the fat and ruddy temptation proffered, and said,—

"No ; a sweetbread is what I've come to get, and you'll let me have it, won't you ?"

"Mrs Torrington have bespoken all I have, for a hontree to-night, Miss Gronow,

she have indeed ; she takes all my sweetbreads off me as fast as I get them. A butcher might raise sweetbreads from seed profitably, if more customers were like the Torringtons.

"But I want one to-day," Maud said gently. "I don't think Mrs Torrington will mind much when she knows that this one sweetbread may make all the difference between mother keeping or losing her new lodger."

"You must have your way, Miss Gronow. You must have your way," the man said, grumbling good-temperedly, and wrapping up the sweetbread as he spoke. Then Maud deposited it among her primroses, and walked away light-hearted and light-footed towards her home.

But Tippetts had a word for her before she entered the little garden.

"Miss Gronow," she cried, coming to her shop-door and speaking rather excitedly

“it's my idea that there's more than meets the eye in your ma's new lodger. While you've been out he's been over here asking question upon question about the Torringtons, and specially about Mr Henry who's coming home, and how his stepmother treats him. I told him, for all her up-country ways, I'd never heard tell that the second Mrs Torrington treated Mr Henry bad ; 'deed, I told him the truth right bold like. I said, say I, 'Sir, she *du not* treat him bad, whatever folks may say, for she's never seen him ; he has never put his foot inside Tor Towers since his father married this young lady.”

“Oh, he's a curious old gentleman, as well as an epicure, is he ?” Maud said, laughing. “Well, Mrs Tippetts, I'm glad you told him the truth, and now I must take his dinner in for mother to make up her mind how she'll cook it.”

“Cook it at this hour ! Lord forgive

him for troubling her so," Mrs Tippetts said piously, "and that's why I never will let lodgings, Miss Maud. I said to a lot that come to me once, 'You take your bit of dinner with me, off what I have, or else you go,' and they went, Miss Maud, they went, the ungrateful warmints, when their rooms was as clean as hands could make them, because, as luck would have it, I killed a pig that week, and they said I gave 'em nothing but pork and beans."

"And *did* you give them anything else?"

"No, Miss Maud, to speak the truth, I *didn't*; and I ask you, a young lady bred in the place, why I *should* ha' given them anything else? All Valewood may know what I feed my pigs on! No scrapings and filthy hog-tubs for me, but good meal and milk, and fresh vegetables boiled as I'd boil 'em for the Queen."

"Yes. I'm sure your pigs have a very

good time of it," Maud said, laughingly, making her escape from the voluble old village dame, to her own home, where she found her mother ready to subject both chicken and sweetbread to the most artistic treatment.

"He's out for a walk, now, Maud; hadn't you better lay his cloth and arrange the table? you'll do it better than Lucy," Mrs Gronow said; and Maud accepted the task, and performed it prettily, massing up prim-roses in the centre, and at four opposite points of the round table, in a most artistic way.

"I've been lucky enough to stop Wright's cart as it went through, and get some smelts," Mrs Gronow observed that evening, as she rose after her own tea to prepare her lodger's dinner.

"Poor, dear mother! so now, instead of sitting quietly in your easy-chair every evening while we read, you'll have to fry, and boil,

and roast, and curry for this fine old gentleman. I shall come out into the kitchen with you, and see if I can't learn your tricks of cooking, and save you the trouble."

"And spoil your hands for the lace work!"

"Ah! I mustn't do that," Maud assented, reluctantly; but though she said that, and meant what she said, she went to the kitchen with her mother, and prepared the bread-sauce for the roast chicken, the egg and bread-crumbs for the sweetbread rissoles, and aided, altogether, very considerably.

At ten minutes to eight the new lodger came in, rang for hot water, dressed himself, and, punctually at eight, sat down to dine by himself, in evening clothes.

Lucy, who waited upon him with eager pride, which was considerably tempered with awe and trembling, reported that he "picked his food over like a cat at first, but seemed to like it in the end; and,

when he'd finished, he told me to tell you he was pleased with his dinner, mum, and gave me half-a-crown for doing the sweetbreads in his favourite way, by chance."

"But, Lucy, you oughtn't to have taken any money for what you didn't do," Maud cried in honest horror.

"I wasn't going to bemean the missus by saying she cooked the dinner," Lucy answered with equal fervour. "So every time he said, 'This is very good,' I made him my duty, and said, 'Glad your pleased, sir;'" and then Lucy turned to do the general part of clearing and washing up, and the two ladies went back to their sitting-room.

"Mother," Maud began, after rather a long silence, "don't you think the time has come for us to have a friendly evening at home? We had one in March at the Draysons', and one in February at the Elliots'; now it's your turn."

"My dear Maud! a friendly evening, with a lodger who dines at eight!"

"Why not? Ask him to join us; let him give up his selfish dinner, and have some of our friendly supper. *I'll* ask him."

"My dear Maud! well, it must be, I suppose, as you wish it; but what *makes* you wish it just now? Is it because—"

Maud looks up, with a bright, bonnie blush.

"Yes, mother, it *is* because Archie Drayson is at home. I want to be kind and nice to him. I want *you* to be kind and nice to him."

"It's a long time since we've seen Archie."

"A very long time—nearly two years, mother; he's a dear old friend, and I want him to feel that you and I like him very much."

"I thought at one time he and you

would have been more to one another than friends ; and if that had been the case, I should have had to tell them that your name is—”

“ Hush, mother,” Maud said suddenly ; “ we’ve agreed never to speak of that.” Then, as if she would bury one painful topic under another, she added, “ But I was going to say I want Archie to feel I like him still, though I couldn’t marry him.”

“ No, he’s not a fitting match for you.”

“ He’s a fitting match for any good girl who loves him ; but I didn’t happen to love him, mother, that’s all. Now we’ve settled we’re to have our little party, when shall it be ? ”

“ This day week *might* do,” Mrs Gronow says hesitatingly.

“ This day week shall do—will do beautifully,” Maud agreed, with more enthusiasm than she usually displayed about any projected festivity. “ What a cosy little even-

ing we'll have, mother; the lamps lighted and the windows open, with the blind put out like a shade to show off our lilies-of-the-valley; and if Mr Brierly isn't frumpy and stiff, and will consent to join us, we may have supper laid out in his room."

"Maud, my dear! have you thought that inviting Archie here will be like encouraging him to ask you again?"

"Mother, I don't want to think of being asked again, or at all," the girl protested; but though she said this honestly, there was something not absolutely displeasing to her in the idea of fine young Archie Drayson being fond of and faithful to her still.

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CHAPTER III.

THE days glided away like hours for both mother and daughter. Mrs Gronow was busy with her preparations for the supper, and with her lodger's eight o'clock dinners, and Maud was working hard at Mrs Torrington's lace. But before the day of the little friendly evening arrived, two important events came to pass.

One was that Mr Brierly called upon his landlady, actually came and sat in her little sitting-room, and accepted the invitation "which Miss Gronow had so kindly given him to join their circle on a certain evening." The other was

that Mr Henry Torrington came home and—

Called to look at the view from Mrs Gronow's kitchen window !

Truly he was a fine young man, this heir of the house of Torrington. Tall, comely, with the comeliness of good blood and breeding, and capital surroundings, and terrible in his happy power of being at home with everybody. Mrs Tippetts nearly talked the roof of her mouth off in his praises, the day he made his first appearance in the village, driving his stepmother's cobs, if you please, and that lady sitting beside him as peaceful and contented as the babe unborn. To see him stop at Mrs Tippetts' shop-door, and actually purchase peppermint candy, was a pretty picture, the dame declared. But all Valewood was exercised in coining phrases expressive of admiration of him, when it learnt that he had crossed the

road to Mrs Gronow's, just for the sake of looking at the view from her kitchen windows !

Somehow or other Archie Drayson, who had been in supreme spirits for a few days, collapsed when he heard of this. Not that he had a word to say against Mr Henry Torrington, but he was conservative, and liked every man and woman to keep his and her proper place.

"And young Mr Torrington is not in place in Mrs Gronow's kitchen, and so I shall tell Maud," he said to his sister, and she laughed in her sisterly sleeve, and thought it rather fun that Archie should be jealous of the young squire.

Young Torrington's visit made quite a commotion in the little house, and even the strange elderly lodger by-and-by expressed interest in the manly tones and good looks of Mrs Gronow's visitor to Lucy, who, as usual, was waiting upon him.

That evening Mrs Gronow was surprised by a second visit from her lodger.

He explained to her that he had heard of the festivities that were to take place in the Tor Towers grounds in connection with young Torrington's return, and asked if she could procure an admission card for him. And whilst he was asking her this, his eyes wandered to the mantelpiece, and settled upon a miniature which was hung up over it.

"Your late husband, I suppose?" he asked.

"My late husband, sir," she assented, very gravely and quietly.

"Many years dead?"

"Lost to me twenty-five years ago, sir."

"H'm! And you have never been tempted to change your widowed state?"

"I have never changed it, sir," she said simply.

"Ah! to be sure. The society of your

child has been enough for you ; nice child she seems, too ; good, nice, quiet, industrious girl. You are a widowed woman, Mrs Gronow ; I am a solitary man. I hope we may live together long and happily."

"I hope the lodgings and my cooking may continue to please you, sir," Mrs Gronow said with dignity, for it came upon her like a thunder-clap that her lodger was going to presume to make love to either herself or her daughter."

"I am more than likely to continue to be well pleased both with the lodgings and your cooking," he replied, retreating from the warmer ground he had occupied a moment ago, to the cooler temperature which ordinarily surrounds the relations of lodger and landlady. "There are many things which I much like about the place ; there are many people in it who deeply interest me. Among these latter are you, your

daughter, and Mr Henry Torrington ; indeed, it is the deep interest I feel in these young people which makes me wish to be present at the rejoicings which are to be held in honour of the young man's return."

"You must not couple them in your thoughts or in your words, sir," the mother said anxiously ; "there are many, *many* reasons why what you hint at can never be. If my daughter leaves me to become a wife, I hope and pray that the man she marries may not be a Torrington."

"You have some reason for not thinking well of the Torringtons ?" he asked sympathetically.

"A bitter reason, indeed ; one that I am not going to discuss with you, sir," she said decisively, and her old gentleman lodger looked approvingly at her, and seemed in nowise offended.

"I shall trust you to get me an admission card," he said, as he took his leave ;

“and you must let me go with your daughter and you, for I am a stranger at Tor Towers,”—his voice shook as he said this,—“no one will know me, and I shall know no one.”

“Very well, sir; but we are humble people for you to be seen with,” she said with proud humility, and the old man’s eyes glistened as he looked at her.

On the morning of the day of Mrs Gronow’s little party, Maud was, as usual, busy at her lace-work, while her mother was preparing dainty dishes in the kitchen, when a knock at the front door announced a visitor.

A man’s knock, undoubtedly — firm, loud, and free! A man’s step, too, in the passage, and a man’s form coming into the room!

Maud’s hand fluttered, and dropped her threads; her colour came like a new-blown rose; her eyes raised themselves

in shy delight, then — dropped despondently.

It was a man ! but not *the* man ! Still she went forward with a gracious, extended hand, and a fine collected manner, and a faultless smile, to greet her guest.

“You’re an early visitor, Archie ; but a welcome one.”

“Thank you, Maud ; is your mother quite well ?”

He had come to tell Maud what he and all sensible people would think of Mr Henry Torrington’s calls to see the view from the kitchen ; but, somehow or other, now that he was in the girl’s presence, he hardly liked to begin.

“Mother’s quite well, out in the kitchen preparing for to-night, you know. Shall we go out and sit with her ? She won’t mind you, Archie,” Maud said speciously.

“I’m so glad she’s quite well,” the young man gasped, in a fever of embar-

rassment. It had never struck him till this moment that Maud, whom he had loved and admired from his boyhood, was a fit mate for a better man than himself. But now, as he looked at her, all the real refinement that was in the girl's nature made itself manifest to him, and he felt local and hobble-de-hoyish to a painful degree.

"Everybody's well in Valewood, I think," the girl went on gaily, seeing and pitying his confusion; and then Archie, seeing her make for the door, gathered his courage together, and spoke.

"Maud, don't go; do stop. I'll go and see Mrs Gronow presently, but it's *you* I've come to see this morning—"

"And now you've seen me, and mother's better worth looking at—" she interrupted; but he would have his say now.

"I want to tell you that people say

—I mean that I've heard—well, the long and the short of it is, that young Mr Torrington comes here painting, or something, doesn't he? And they say that he comes to see you, in reality. The painting's all a pretence."

"Do they say so?" she said, mastering her annoyance, and pitying Archie more profoundly than ever for his folly. "Well, all I can say is, that it's a very pretty pretence, and that he is making a beautiful picture of it. You shouldn't listen to what they say about old friends, Archie, you really shouldn't; and now come and see mother."

"No; stop."

"What for?"

"For me to tell you again what I told you once before, Maud. I know you're too good for me. I know I've no right to think about you. You're above me more than ever. I feel that; but if you'll marry me,

I'll improve myself, I will, indeed ; I'll read and learn about things you like, and—"

"Oh ! don't, don't," the girl cried, pained by his humility almost as much as by his persistency in seeking her. "It can't be as you wish, Archie ; not because of anything wanting in you, you're good enough for any girl, and lovable enough for any girl to love you—"

"Only you can't."

"Only it's not come to me to do it, that's the truth ; it is one of the things that can't be ordered by our own wills, Archie. I might as well ask why you can't love Meggie Elliot, as you ask why I don't care for you in that way."

"I can tell why I don't love Meggie ; because I love you. Will you answer as readily ?"

"Answer what ?"

"Ah ! Maud, *you* know !" he said reproachfully.

"But I can't answer," she said, lifting her honest eyes to his; "it would shame me to give my reason. I've no right to have such a reason at all."

"Then it is young Mr Torrington?"

"And you have no right to say that," she cried indignantly. "What I won't say to myself shall not be said to me; our old friendship must not make you cruel and coarse, Archie."

"Coarse! that's it! I'm 'coarse' compared to him," he groaned; and Maud realised that he was one whose own pain would render him callous to suffering in others.

"If you will come and see mother, come now," she said, ignoring his last speech; but his disappointment had overcome his sense of politeness, and he could only muster manners enough to say good morning to Maud, and depart hurriedly.

Then Maud sat down to her lace-work

again ; but she tangled her threads terribly. Her thoughts formed themselves into one little set of words, which she repeated over and over again,—

“If they only knew ! Oh ! if they only knew.”

By the time Mrs Gronow came into dinner, Maud was calmly absorbed in her work again, for she had resolved that her mother at least should be spared the sting of these rumours.

“So Archie Drayson has been here, Maud,” Mrs Gronow said presently ; “what has he to say for himself ?”

“Oh ! he came to hear how you were, and about Mr Henry Torrington’s picture. You know, Archie never says much ; I did nearly all the talking.”

“Then that’s over,” Mrs Gronow said to herself with a sigh.

By the time the Draysons and the Elliots, and Mr Brierly, and a few other people

came that night, the two little sitting-rooms were transformed into the prettiest of reception and supper rooms. Wax candles burned in straight old silver candlesticks, tea and coffee were served in the richest purple-grounded, flower-painted old Crown Derby cups and saucers; flowers decorated every available nook and corner of the rooms, and lily-white filmy curtains hung at the windows and over the open doorway. The old cottage piano had been hoisted on to glass salt-cellars for the occasion, and on this the young lady world of Valewood performed with modest confidence, to the intense delight of their respective families and friends. Mrs Tippetts, standing at her door opposite, drank in the melodies with appreciative enthusiasm, as became one who in former days had sung in the choir. And presently a young man, sauntering through the village, with his cigar and his dogs, was guilty of the enor-

mity of stopping to listen outside Mrs Gronow's gate.

"Ah! Mrs Tippetts," he said, crossing over as he caught sight of that worthy woman ducking and smiling at him in the moonlight, "high jinks are going on here to-night; is Mrs Gronow having a party?"

"A real grand one, sir," Mrs Tippetts began, warming to her descriptive work without delay. "Lucy, she slipped over to ask me to drop in and look at the supper, which is a'ready laid out in Mr Brierly's room, sir,—Mr Brierly being the gentleman that lodges at Mrs Gronow's through my recommendation, in a manner of saying, for when he stops and asks me quite grand and civil, 'Could I direct him to any furnished lodgings?' Mrs Gronow's name was on my tongue in a moment; and there he is."

"And there *I* shall be in another moment," Mr Henry Torrington said lightly. Then, without more ado, he

went over and knocked, and when the rather warm and flustered Lucy opened the door, he walked in just like one of the party, and was claiming a welcome from Mrs Gronow, which she could not refrain from giving him, before Lucy could say, "Missus was engaged."

Maud, seated at the piano, accompanying Archie Drayson in a song which may be described as obsolete now, entitled, "I would I were a daisy," half turned her head, and gave the new-comer a glance, which he would have been more or less than man if he had not construed aright.

It was a loving welcome of the warmest order, involuntarily as it was given.

Henry Torrington saw it, and rejoiced in it; and Archie Drayson saw it, and hadn't a single desire to be a daisy, or anything else left.

And somebody else saw it, and began to act very strangely.

This was Mr Brierly. He was seen at this juncture to wipe a tear from his eye ; then he went up to young Torrington, and, after shaking him heartily by the hand, he inquired for the squire, and then very distinctly for the squire's elder brother—that former Harry Torrington of whom he, the nephew, had doubtless heard.”

When he asked this question, quite audibly, the guests gathered closer round these two men, and poor Mrs Gronow gave a faint cry, and then came up to the group with imploring hands held out. And when she did that, off came the huge mass of moustache and beard, and a good-looking, middle-aged man stood in the place of Mr Brierly.

Then, with his arm round his wife's waist, and his head on his daughter Maud's shoulder, he told his story.

He had been wild and a reprobate. He had married the best woman in the

world, and deserted her and their child. He had made himself dead to the world, and had let his brother fill his place. But now he had repented him of his evil ways, and had come home with the large fortune he had made to make his wife and daughter happy, and to—let his brother still remain in the position he had filled so well, and his brother's son succeed him.

Even the young wife of the squire at Tor Towers saw nothing to regret in it all, when she found that her position was to be in nowise affected by her old brother-in-law's return. While, as for Mrs Tippetts, she declared on the morning of Henry Torrington's marriage to his cousin Maud, that she "had always said there was something real good about they Gronows, even when they was thought to be no more than Gronows, and known to be up-country people."

THE END.





THAT AWFUL YEAR!

I HAD been down to Plymouth to take leave of my husband, whose regiment was ordered to the Cape for possible or probable service in Basutoland, and, in accordance with his wishes and latest directions, I had come back to our little house in the Bayswater Road, where I meant to reside with my only sister during the period of his absence.

I had only been home one day, however, and was still almost stultified by my grief and consternation at his unlooked-for departure (I was only a wife of three months'

standing), when I received a letter purporting to be written by my husband's uncle, a Mr Greyson, stating that he had my husband's authority for inviting me down to his house in Devonshire, to spend the approaching festive seasons of Christmas and New Year with him.

"Bring all your toilet and millinery triumphs with you, and do not forget that wonderful pearl-and-emerald set of which I have heard Walter speak, for I want my niece to look her best in the brilliant country *coterie* into which I shall introduce her. I shall expect you to leave by the nine A.M. train to-morrow, and my carriage shall be at the Kingsbridge Road Station at four o'clock to meet you." Then, with a few affectionate expressions towards myself, and wishes for Walter's welfare, the writer concluded by signing himself my "attached uncle, Edward Greyson."

My sister and I were sitting at five o'clock

tea in the dear little drawing-room that Walter and I had taken such pride in furnishing, when this letter was delivered to me, and I gave a longing, loving glance round the room, as I handed the missive to Kate, saying,—

“Read that, Katie! He’s kind to ask me, but I would much rather stay here with you in my own dear little home.”

How well I remember the aspect the room wore then—an aspect under which I was never destined to see it any more! There was not much light in the grey December sky, and what little there was came but dimly through the folds of Japanese muslin that draped the windows.

But the fire-light played cheerfully over everything, and an amber-glass lamp was already alight on a little ebony table.

It was not a rigidly stiff high-art room, but it was sufficiently artistic to suit the most refined taste. A rich Turkey carpet of

gloriously subdued hue covered the floor; the furniture was ebony, and chairs and sofa were covered with old gold-coloured satin. The walls were papered with one of those eye-comforting papers, and thickly hung with Oriental and other china, and on a low black cabinet stood a quantity of valuable early English silver.

There was one colossal bowl and tankard to match, dating from James II.'s reign, that my husband had been repeatedly offered enormous sums for by connoisseurs, and a number of apostle spoons, quaint cups and dishes and other things, that had been heirlooms in the Greville family for generations.

Kate lounged on one side of the fire on a couch, and I sat on the other in a high-backed chair of grand proportions that belonged once to Madame de Maintenon.

Between us was a long low velvet table, and on this the afternoon tea was set forth

in a service of rare old blue-and-white Worcester china on a Benares tray.

"Don't go, Ada," Kate said, curtly. "Old Greyson never sent you so much as a kind word when you married Walter, and you know he always thinks every one is looking after the loaves and fishes that may be left when he dies. Don't go."

"He says Walter wishes me to go."

"Walter didn't tell you so."

"No; but, Kate, I'm bound to believe my husband's uncle and bound to please him, for he has a fine property to leave, and Walter's his nearest relative."

"I thought he had another nephew on the Greyson side?" Kate interrupted.

"So he has. But Robert Greyson is banished and doesn't count for anything. His uncle has cast him off, for a long time."

"Did you ever see Robert Greyson, Ada?"

"Never, and never want to see him.

Now, Kate, advise me. I can't leave you here alone while I'm away. Shall I keep both the servants on, or shall I send Emma, who breaks more than her own value of china every day, and leave cook alone?"

"Can't I stay and look after things for you?"

"Mamma wouldn't allow it, dear; you must remember you're not a married lady—it would be most improper," I laughed.

"Bother the impropriety," Kate said promptly. "If I can do any good by staying, I shall stay. You ought not to leave a lot of valuable things under the charge of cook only. Thieves may break in and steal, my dear. Let me stay?"

"Can't be thought of," I said, shaking my head; "but mamma and you may come in sometimes and look round for me."

"How long do you mean to stay?"

"Six weeks, Mr Greyson asks me for."

"Ada, six weeks is a great deal too long for a woman to be away from her own house," Kate said with mock solemnity. "At the end of a month I shall write and peremptorily command you to return."

"Come up to my room and help me to choose the fetching toilettes old Uncle Greyson wants me to wear in his brilliant *coterie*," I laughed. And so, before dinner, Kate and I adjourned to my bedroom, and commenced packing up the triumphs of my *trousseau* and all my jewellery.

"Won't you send your silver to mamma to take care of?" Kate asked, the following day, as I was leaving.

And I said,—

"Oh no! I won't dismantle the house."

And I went off with a light heart, for Uncle Greyson's favour was a great thing to gain.

Punctually at four o'clock the train ran into the Kingsbridge Road Station, and there, in the road outside the rails, was the little brougham awaiting me.

As I stepped in, I thought what remarkably saturnine and grim servants Uncle Greyson employed; but, having no one to offer it to, I kept my opinion to myself.

The shades of night fell, and still we went driving on through dreary, apparently interminable, country roads. For some reason or other, I had taken it for granted that Uncle Greyson's house was near the station; but I must have travelled a distance of ten miles at least when the carriage pulled up at the entrance door of a long, low, ivy-covered house, that stood, as far as I could see, in a well-wooded, park-like meadow.

Faint lights issued from one or two windows; but there were no signs of

the high and hearty hilarity I had prepared myself to witness.

The servant jumped off the box and rang the bell, and in a minute the door was opened, and I was ushered into a large, wainscoted hall, the roof of which was traversed by fine carved beams.

A wood-fire burned on the hearth, and through an open doorway on the right I caught a cheering sight of a deliciously warm and cosy "interior"—a room hung and furnished with crimson velvet, in the middle of which a little round table, covered with snowy damask and glittering with glass and silver, stood ready for dinner.

"Where is my uncle—Mr Greyson? Tell him Mrs Greville has arrived," I said to the sulky-looking maid-servant who had opened the door.

"Master left word that you was to be made comfortable and order everything you want," she replied gruffly.

And I gasped out,—

“Left word! Isn’t Mr Greyson at home?”

“Master’ll be home to-morrow, and he’ll give you his reasons for being away to-night when he comes,” she grunted. “Here, Simkins, take the lady’s boxes to her room, and—when will you please to dine, ma’am?”

I choked back my tears of chagrin (little I knew what good cause I had for tears then), and said, “Any time—eight would do,” and then I followed Simkins, and, lighted by the housemaid, made my way to the room that was prepared for me.

It was a beautiful room, not lofty, but otherwise of ample proportions, and, seeing it for the first time by the light of candles, I did not notice that the window was too high up for me to get any view from it. Another cheerful wood-

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fire was burning here ; the bedstead was of old, handsomely-carved mahogany, and hangings and curtains were of rich amber damask, and the carpet was thick and soft. A well-appointed dressing-table, covered with amber silk and lace, occupied one niche, and a double marble-topped washing-stand another. A pier-glass against one wall, and a monster cheval-glass near the dressing-table, gave me no excuse for not putting my things on straight, and a few oil-paintings on the walls,—all of them portraits, but portraits by a master,—of gentlemen and ladies of the period when portrait-painting was at its best, satisfied my art-feeling. Altogether, had it not been for Uncle Greyson's unaccountable rudeness in being out, I should have felt very happy and comfortable this evening,

At eight o'clock I was summoned to dinner, and I went down to the pretty

crimson glittering room, the aspect of which had pleased me so much on my entrance. I was waited on by Simkins, the footman who had come to meet me at the station, and both the dinner and the way it was served were perfect. Indeed, it was an over-elaborated dinner for one person to sit down to, and as I went from oyster-soup to filleted sole, larks stuffed with mushrooms, a pigeon stewed with peas, mutton-cutlets served in a way that would have tempted an anchorite, and a snipe that was dressed to perfection, I felt ashamed of my appetite, and at the same time a little sorry that Uncle Greyson should deem me such a *gourmet*.

That night I amused myself by setting out my bottles of perfumes and pomades from my dressing-case on to the toilet-table, and by looking over the contents of my jewel-case. I even took out the

superb set of pearls and emeralds which had been given to me on my wedding-day by my godfather, and tried the effect of them over my dress of plain black satin.

The pearls were of the purest form and colour, and the flashing emeralds commanded me to think them as beautiful as diamonds as they flashed upon me in the candle-light in all their magical liquid radiancy from my throat and arms.

"How well I look in them!" I cried, in my young womanly vanity.

Alas! it was the first and last time I ever was aided by that pearl-and-emerald suite to enhance my natural charms.

I went down to breakfast the following morning in the same pretty long room in which I had dined the previous evening. Everything was in exquisite order, and on my plate a letter was lying. In an instant I saw there was no postmark,

and, wondering at this, I tore it open and read as follows :—

“ You will do well, Mrs Walter Greville, to quietly accept the situation in which you find yourself. Any attempt on your part to bribe or corrupt the servants who are attending on you, will rebound on your own head. When you walk out, Simkins will attend you, and the brougham is entirely at your service. No letters that you write will be posted until they have passed through my hands, so probably you will not trouble yourself to write many. I shall do myself the pleasure of lunching with you at two o'clock to-day. Meantime, I beg to subscribe myself your most sincere well-wisher.”

No signature, no anything, to give me the faintest clue to the identity of the writer of this alarming epistle. In a torrent of rage and fear, I rang the bell. Simkins answered it.

"Who brought this note? How came it here?" I asked.

And he replied,—

"My master gave it to me."

"Is your master Mr Greyson? What infamous plot is this against me?"

He smiled insultingly, and replied without hesitation that it was not his place to give me information about his master, and that I could ask that gentleman all I wanted to know myself when I saw him.

Inwardly terrified out of my wits, but resolved to keep up a brave outward show, I dismissed Simkins, after ordering the brougham to be brought round at once. I would make an effort to escape, at any rate.

Even if the coachman had orders to treat me as a prisoner, and only to take me where it pleased him, I felt that I should meet some human being on these country roads to whom I could scream an application for aid and release.

When I thought this, I little knew what men—and horses—I had to deal with.

The brougham came to the door punctually at the hour named by me, and I hastened to dress myself and get away. As I was leaving my bedroom, I be-thought me of my pearl-and-emerald suite; that, at least, I would conceal about my person, and take away with me. Accordingly, I opened my jewel-case, only to find my pearls and emeralds gone!

I was in a coil, indeed! My liberty threatened, and I helpless in a den of thieves!

Further search showed me that every article of jewellery I possessed was gone. Even the gold brooch I had left sticking in the toilet-cushion was taken away!

Trembling and confused, I hurried down and stepped into the brougham, to which was a pair of fine-drawn, weedy-looking horses.

"Take me to the nearest town. I want a draper's shop," I said boldly.

"Simkins repeated my order to the coachman, and then got up on the box with an evil smile on his face.

In another minute we were rolling away from the long, lone house, that had a weird appearance, I fancied, and I hoped that the most unpleasant episode of my life was going to terminate comfortably and speedily, after all. But after driving for a couple of hours my hopes went down, and my heart sunk low again.

We had passed three or four people on foot and driving, and I had tapped at the carriage windows furiously—for they were fastened in a way that resisted my utmost efforts to open them—and shouted at the top of my voice, but to no avail. The coachman simply drove faster.

I soon, too, gave up all hopes of coming to either a town or village. I was carefully

kept to solitary roads between high hedges. I was a prisoner, and I began to ask myself, with horror, to what end.

After driving for about two hours, I found myself again in front of the long, lone, desolate house; and as Simkins opened the door, and intimated that if I didn't descend he should help me out, I sprang past him and rushed into the house, crying aloud for some one to tell me what this state of bondage meant.

As I spoke, the bitter-looking, grim, gaunt housemaid opened the door of the room in which I had dined and breakfasted, and, simply saying, "Master's waiting lunch for you, ma'am," hurried me into the room.

END OF VOL. II.

